

APART AND A PART:
READING THE ART OF SUSAN MACWILLIAM IN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

AMY WHITE: APART AND A PART:
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(Under the direction of Dr. Cary Levine)

In this thesis, I argue the work of Belfast-based artist Susan MacWilliam can be read meaningfully as part of the social, political and cultural context of Northern Ireland since 1969, the year in which the artist was born and also the start of the violent conflict commonly known as The Troubles. In 1998, when the Belfast Agreement (otherwise known as the Good Friday Agreement) was concluded, MacWilliam began working with themes of occult and paranormal practice and research, which has remained at the center of her practice to this day. Despite her claim not to produce politically-inflected art, my thesis examines the discourse and cultural production surrounding The Troubles and uncovers a matrix of trace thematics that permeates MacWilliam's work and recurs in a range of cultural forms and texts. Such recurrent themes include: death, grief, loss, and mourning; haunting and hauntedness; and questions of belief, truth and contested meanings.

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. William Roll, an affable, fit, 80-something professor, stands in his kitchen describing an occurrence he witnessed forty years ago. A heavy kitchen table “flew up” into the air, made a 45-degree rotation, and came crashing down on the unsuspecting chairs below. As he recounts his experience, the hand-held video camera that records him floats a bit, responsive to his words, pulling away when he points to a plastic trash bin as a means of indicating distance, and closing back in as he continues his story. The camera work suggests both the ephemeral presence of a spirit and the rapt attention of a mortal artist conducting an interview. The unseen person recording Roll is Northern Ireland-based artist Susan MacWilliam. The video is MacWilliam’s portrait of Roll, titled *Some Ghosts* (2009), a pastiche of interview fragments, impressions of a lifetime researching occult and paranormal phenomena (Figure 1).

The fleeting scenario described above contains the thematic elements that recur in MacWilliam’s work and that will drive this paper, which forges a connection between MacWilliam’s work in the realm of the occult and the paranormal with the social, political, and cultural context of Northern Ireland since 1969. Such themes include three basic areas. The first is death, grief, loss, and mourning, established in the work’s title and in Roll’s role as a poltergeist investigator, the idea of the ghost inextricably

associated with death and its attendant modes of grief, loss and mourning.¹ The second thematic area touched on in this brief scene is that of haunting and hauntedness, played out in Roll's telekinetic narrative of the flying table, and emphasized in MacWilliam's use of camera-as-invisible-presence. The third thematic area involves questions of belief, truth and contested meanings, a defining characteristic of the fringe field of occult and paranormal research.

For more than a decade, MacWilliam's practice has centered on the subject of occult and paranormal phenomena and the people who practice and investigate it. She sustains ambivalence in her work by identifying as both participant and observer.² In *Some Ghosts*, for example, the artist remains off-screen for most of the video, although at one point we see her setting up a shot. This fleeting glimpse of MacWilliam in *Some Ghosts* supports the claims of this paper, which seeks to read MacWilliam's work as both apart-from and a-part-of the cultural, social and political context of her native Northern Ireland over the past thirty-plus years. MacWilliam's momentary inclusion in the video, a cinematic gesture indebted as much to Hitchcock (the director's notorious stealth appearances in his own work) as to Godard (whose self-reflexive techniques often revealed his own presence as well as that of the camera), pushes for such both/and dualities in the work (both participant and observer, both Hitchcockian homage and Godardian self-reflexivity). Is MacWilliam an objective observer gathering data about

¹I would argue that ghosts, including poltergeist, are indeed associable to death, grief, loss, and mourning. Ghosts are associable to the dead, and the dead are associable with loss, grief, and mourning. Haunting and hauntedness, for example, are not devoid of those associations. For me a poltergeist cannot merely haunt - underneath the dominant quality of fear and terror is the fact of its association with death, perhaps even a terrible or wrongful death. Inasmuch as my paper is situated in the context of death, grief, loss and mourning generated through violent conflict, these chains of associations are significant.

²"By shifting her role between the positions of artist-as-researcher and artist-as-medium, MacWilliam both directs and performs her art. Even when she is not visible in the work, she is a palpable presence." Susan MacWilliam and Karen Downey, *Remote Viewing* (London, UK: Black Dog Pub., 2008), 15.

the subject that has gripped her for so many years? Or, is she a vetted member of a peculiar tribe of occultists and paranormal believers, an intimate insider, a friend?

MacWilliam refrains from disclosing her position as to a belief or disbelief in the occult and paranormal phenomena around which her work circulates. At the center of this paper is MacWilliam's careful refusal to clarify these terms.

MacWilliam was born in Belfast in 1969, the year in which political upheaval and rioting culminated in the deployment of British troops in Belfast and Derry, inaugurating the decades-long period in Northern Ireland that has come to be known as The Troubles. The Belfast Agreement (otherwise known as the Good Friday Agreement) was concluded in 1998, the year MacWilliam first presented work in photography and video with *The Last Person*, her inaugural work dealing with occult and paranormal themes that remain at the center of her practice to this day.³ The Bloody Sunday Inquiry (or Saville Inquiry) continued into 2005, and its findings on the events that lead to the massacre of fourteen innocent men and boys in 1972, were published in 2010.⁴ These milestone events enframe a history of social violence that factors into life in Northern Ireland during the period that will be the focus of this study and that serves as a discernable subtext of MacWilliam's life and work, from 1969 to the present.

MacWilliam refrains from revealing an opinion about the occult and paranormal phenomena she deals with in her work, rigorously maintaining an ambiguous "non-position" as to her belief or disbelief in such phenomena. In parallel with this, while neither MacWilliam nor writers who have written about her describe the artist's work as

³Paul Dixon and Eamonn O'Kane, *Northern Ireland since 1969* (Harlow, England; New York: Longman, 2011), xiv, xxi.

⁴"Key findings," *BBC*, June 15, 2010, sec. Foyle & West, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10319881>.

reflecting or addressing the decades-long conflict in Northern Ireland, I have raised the question of what it might mean to refrain from taking a position in the context of living in a zone of intense conflict. This question has led to an expanded inquiry into possible readings of MacWilliam's work that would take the context of The Troubles into account.

By making artwork that deals with the world of occult and paranormal research without disclosing her own belief or disbelief in occult or paranormal phenomena, and by neither disclosing her own views or beliefs about The Troubles nor directly addressing the conflict in Northern Ireland, MacWilliam she sets herself apart from artists making overt political statements in their work. As this paper will demonstrate, the central theme of her work—that of occult and paranormal research—can be found in the discourse surrounding The Troubles. Such themes are also present in the discourse surrounding trauma studies, in the terms used to describe the psychic effects of social violence. Beyond this, themes of the occult and the paranormal can also be found in contemporary Northern Irish artwork that both deals directly with The Troubles and in work that does not address The Troubles. Three major themes recur within MacWilliam's work that also appear throughout the discourse and cultural production surrounding The Troubles, the area of trauma studies, and in the contemporary artwork of Northern Ireland. They include death, grief, loss, and mourning; haunting and hauntedness; and questions of belief, truth and contested meanings. The ubiquitousness of these shared themes indicates that, despite her choice not to produce overtly political art, MacWilliam's work can be meaningfully read in the social, political and cultural context of the Troubles.

This paper will present three specific frameworks through which to consider MacWilliam's art. Chapter 1 will focus on the core concerns of MacWilliam's work.

Such concerns and claims situate the artist as working outside of any immediate social/political context. While the artist claims merely to be pursuing themes that fascinate her and that her work neither reflects nor speaks to the condition of traumatic violence perpetuated by The Troubles, her chosen area of occult and paranormal research would suggest otherwise, as outlined in Chapter 2. Chapter 2 proposes an alternative read of MacWilliam's work by tracing occult and paranormal themes in the discourse surrounding the conflict in Northern Ireland, in the discourse of trauma studies, and in works by other Northern Irish artists, thus situating MacWilliam's work in alignment/accord with trace thematics of a context of conflict without participating in overtly political art-making. The overview presented in Chapter 2 includes a brief but significant passage by Noel Kelly for the Northern Irish magazine *Circa*, in which he identifies MacWilliam's "apartness" from an oppressive cultural atmosphere in which Belfast artists were expected to make work about The Troubles.⁵ This cultural condition is borne out in the term "Troubles burn-out," also discussed in this chapter, and confirms such an oppressive atmosphere. Chapter 3 presents a case study that investigates photographs as agents of social change. In their analysis of a movement to bring justice to the Bloody Sunday Dead, John Herron and Tom Lynch consider the use of photographs of the dead as tools of persuasion, which they analyze as a rhetorical form in which the dead impel the living to action. Herron and Lynch's essay serves the claims of this thesis as a framework through which to consider MacWilliam's photography and video-based works based on the world of occult and paranormal research in ways that

⁵Noel Kelly, "An Outsider in Her Native Town - The Work of Susan MacWilliam," *Circa*, no. 118 (2006): 48.

subtly connect her work to The Troubles without dismantling her position of “apartness” from the oppressive role of being a “Troubles artist.”

The context of The Troubles gave rise in the most general sense to a condition of violence, death, loss, grief, and mourning that persisted for decades, which, at various points of intensity in the past half-century, directly affected a vast portion of the population of Northern Ireland. Dixon and O'Kane report that between 1966 and 2006 approximately 3,720 Northern Irish citizens were killed. With a population of just 1.6 million, a survey indicated, during this period, more than half the country personally knew someone who had been killed or injured.⁶ This condition, therefore, can be understood as a condition of trauma. Given Dixon and O'Kane's assertions, and given MacWilliam's proximity to the conflict as a resident of Belfast, the city perhaps most associated with the conflict, for most of her life, we have sufficient grounds to read her work in significant relation to that context.

⁶ Paul Dixon and Eamonn O'Kane, *Northern Ireland Since 1969* (Harlow, England; New York: Longman, 2011), 4.

CHAPTER 1

MACWILLIAM'S ART AND THE PARANORMAL

In the first scene of MacWilliam's silent, black-and-white video, *The Last Person* (1998) (Figure 2), the mouth of the artist is framed in extreme close-up. The entire screen is taken up by the mouth, so close as to render MacWilliam anonymous. MacWilliam's mouth could be any mouth, it is framed so close as to be abstracted from the idea of a mouth, and yet, as an opening title card conveys, it is meant to be understood as the mouth of Helen Duncan (1898-1956), the last person to be tried under the British Witchcraft Act of 1735. From within the dark interior of the MacWilliam/Duncan mouth is pulled a continuous taut swath of white loose-woven cheesecloth. The fabric is wet, gleaming with saliva. The downward pull of the material tugs at MacWilliam's lower lip, dragging it down, prying it open, revealing teeth. Lips struggle to close over the masticated streaming cloth and prevail—for a few seconds the cloth emerges seamlessly from between closed lips, only to pry and distort the lower lip downward once again. This spittle-infused cloth, the co-star of the video, is cast as ectoplasm, defined by French physiologist Charles Richet at the beginning of the 20th century as a substance that emanates from the orifices of the bodies of psychic mediums when in the state of contacting spirits of the dead.⁷ This is the image MacWilliam chose to inaugurate her first work in video and photography. The video—and the mouth—

⁷Charles Richet, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 10.

also inaugurated her first work in the area of occult and paranormal phenomena.

MacWilliam's construction of a disembodied mouth as the site, as the epicenter of a (contrived or emergent) occult event, is a seminal image for a unique ongoing art practice.

MacWilliam does not consider her subject matter of occult and paranormal research to be localizable to her immediate (social, historical, political) context. She describes her interest as having originated from the relatively random occurrence of having caught a documentary program on spirit mediums and séances on television in 1997:

I had seen a documentary about séance room activities and spirit photography; the unfamiliar imagery and layout and choreography of the séance room intrigued me. I became interested in the collision of modern spiritualism with the popularisation of photography, and in how photography was used to offer 'scientific proof'.⁸

Inspired by the documentary, MacWilliam began researching in the area of occult and paranormal phenomena at the Belfast Public Library and through the British Library, London, by post.⁹ She focused on the symbiotic relationship between practitioners of the occult and the paranormal and the researchers who constructed elaborate apparatuses with which to intervene, measure and authenticate the results. MacWilliam keyed in on the gendered split in the division of labor of these scenarios. In most cases the spirit mediums and other occult practitioners were female and the researchers investigating them were male. MacWilliam pursued the power dynamics she saw at play in a kind of circuitry of control:

⁸Susan MacWilliam, "My Adventures in the Supernormal," *The Paranormal Review*, no. 59 (July 2011): 4.

⁹From MacWilliam's notes to art writer Martha Langford in 2009, provided by the artist via email, January 28, 2012.

I became very interested in particular cases. In the séance room. In the levels of control—the psychical researcher controlling the medium, the medium being controlled by the spirit control, the audience being in effect under the control of the medium. They came in anticipation of an event and were ‘held’ by the medium.¹⁰

Such questions of power and control among people and groups of people carry with them an inherently political valence. The kinds of relationships explored by MacWilliam perpetuate such dynamics, found in the relations described above by MacWilliam, a network of dynamics that might also include artist and viewer. Despite the artist’s choice not to address the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland, her engagement with such questions of power and control resonate with a condition of colonial conflict.

In her research, MacWilliam discovered Helen Duncan, a Scottish materialization medium from the 1930s, who was the last person to be tried under the British Witchcraft Act of 1735. Duncan was known for her capacity to conjure spirits through ectoplasmic emissions. Duncan is said to have described the sinking of a British naval ship while in trance during a séance, revealing sensitive military information that was not made public until months later. While the court case was ostensibly an investigation of fraud, supporters of Duncan (who are active to this day) insisted that the trial was a form of persecution, set up to silence Duncan and to suppress military secrets.¹¹ Duncan was subjected to intense scrutiny, submitting to séance protocols that involved strip searches, bodily constraints and bondage imposed on her to minimize her capacity for simulated ectoplasmic production or other sleight-of-hand manipulations.¹² In this regard, *The Last*

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Nina Shandler, *The Strange Case of Hellish Nell: the Story of Helen Duncan and the Witch Trial of World War II*, 1st Da Capo Press ed. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006), 71.

¹²Shandler describes a research intervention with Duncan: “[Spiritualist researcher, Dr. Fielding-Ould] walked around and around, binding and tying Mrs. Duncan with multiple knots.” Ibid., 65.

Person is probably the most overtly political of MacWilliam's works. With its historical references to World War II, the dominating procedures Duncan was put through during her trial, and perhaps most poignantly the idea that Duncan was a Scottish person being tried under British law, the work communicates an undercurrent of colonialist concerns and the echoes of violent social conflict.

The Last Person was produced in 1998, the same year in which The Belfast Agreement (otherwise known as the Good Friday Agreement) was concluded. Although *The Last Person* makes no direct reference to The Troubles (nor does any of MacWilliam's work), the historical confluence of major events and upheavals that occurred in Northern Ireland and MacWilliam's work, in particular her shift toward researched, historical, photographic work that deals with occult and paranormal themes, which happened the same year in which the Belfast Agreement was concluded, create a context of influence that is worth considering, despite the artist's choice to refuse such themes. Indeed, as a lifetime resident of Belfast, MacWilliam's choice not to make overtly Troubles-based art would require a willful decision, rather than a casual one. The confluence of major developments in the Northern Irish conflict and a range of themes embraced in MacWilliam's work serve to situate her work as meaningfully legible within such conflict.

MacWilliam developed *The Last Person* based on court transcripts from Duncan's trial, which she studied via microfilm from *The London Times* and drawing from spirit photography from the period to construct images for the work. MacWilliam's first work in video and photography was also her first work that dealt with occult and paranormal phenomena, and in this way forges a parallel with the history of photography itself, in

that the introduction of photography coincided with a spectacular rise in Spiritualism. As Susan Sontag has observed, since its inception, photography has “has kept company with death.”¹³ Roland Barthes once told an interviewer, “If photography is to be discussed on a serious level, it must be described in relation to death.”¹⁴ From the earliest days of photography there was a conflation between photography and death, and the two have never been fully disassociated. This remains a powerful subtext of MacWilliam’s work. As Geoffrey Batchen has pointed out, “It should not be forgotten that photography has been associated with death since the beginning.” Batchen notes the way in which, among other actions morbidly associated with the medium, the first photographs took so long to expose that they required their subjects to “act as if dead” in order for their likeness to be captured.¹⁵ Very early on, photography was used to produce *mementos mori*, in which images of the dead were captured in photographic portraits as tokens of consolation for the grieving. During this same period “spirit photography” came into vogue, a historical confluence identified and embraced by MacWilliam.¹⁶ The extreme popularity of spirit photography in turn spurred Spiritualist practitioners to endeavor to root out charlatans and frauds in the spirit business. The Spiritualists believed in the existence of spirits, and their aim was not to debunk all evidence, but rather to impose scientific method on claims

¹³Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 1st Picador ed. (New York: Picador, 2004), 24.

¹⁴Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*: *Reflections on Photography*, 1st American pbk. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), ix.

¹⁵Geoffrey Batchen, “Ectoplasm: Photography in the Digital Age,” in Carol Squiers, *Over Exposed*: *Essays on Contemporary Photography* (New York: New Press, 1999), 11.

¹⁶In a video interview she did in connection with the 2009 Venice Biennale, MacWilliam makes the point that “[m]odern Spiritualism arose around the same time as the birth of photography” “British Council – Venice Biennale”, n.d., <http://venicebiennale.britishcouncil.org/people/id/1199/media/745>.

of ghost photography in order to determine which were faked and which were authentic.¹⁷

The idea of the photograph as evidentiary object, with the capacity to confirm the nature of reality as well as the power to convey false representations of the real, is a recurring theme in MacWilliam's work. This tension will be important for positioning her work as reflective of the condition of conflicting narratives and contested meanings that has driven and perpetuated the conflict in Northern Ireland.

The history of photography and the history of occult and paranormal research are so profoundly interconnected that in analyzing the art work of someone like MacWilliam, who uses one medium to talk about the other, it becomes virtually impossible to consider the function of photography in the work as separate from the occult questions of hauntedness, ghostly presence, death, grief, loss, and mourning.

The Last Person represented another "first" for MacWilliam, in that it is the first time she appeared in her work. On one hand, the artist's appearance in the work necessitates its reading as self-portrait. On the other, inasmuch as the artist appears in the guise of someone else, it is also categorizable as portraiture. Most centrally, inasmuch as MacWilliam appears in this work as Duncan, we can also understand the portrayal not as representation but rather as reanimation, as bringing forth the dead, the past into the present. This aspect of channeling the dead casts the artist in the role of spirit medium, not merely representationally but functionally. Indeed, the artist has described the process in these terms:

¹⁷John Gray establishes the motivation of Spiritualism as being based in a refusal of scientific materialism. "The psychical researchers' search for evidence that human personality survived death was driven by revulsion against scientific materialism." John Gray, *The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death* (London; New York, N.Y.: Allen Lane, 2011), 2.

In 1997 I got arts council funding and bought a Hi8 video camera – around the same time I saw a television programme about séance room photography – and was instantly fascinated in the subject. I started to research the area and in learning to use my video camera I became a ‘medium’ in front of it.¹⁸

Reading MacWilliam in the guise of a medium reanimating Duncan as a form of virtual occultism is not an off-hand or glib interpretation of the work. Aside from including “coincidences and connections” as part of her practice, she also associates making social connections with “acting as a ‘medium’ or ‘conduit’ to connect people and pasts” among the people she encounters in her research.¹⁹ Beginning with *The Last Person* in 1998, MacWilliam’s practice has included meeting living practitioners in the field, conducting interviews and documenting her subjects and their worlds. MacWilliam’s role in this work has evolved from interested artist to involved participant and friend, as she has cultivated warm relationships with many of her subjects. The artist performs a kind of permeability between worlds as an active participant in the sphere of paranormal research (she is listed on the staff roster of the Parapsychology Foundation of New York) and as a successful practitioner in the world of contemporary art (she represented Northern Ireland in the 2009 Venice Biennale).

MacWilliam pushes paradoxical meanings in work that deals with the pursuit of immaterial phenomena by placing an emphasis on physical embodiment and materiality. An example of this would be the extreme close-up of MacWilliam’s mouth, out of which extrude mounds of saliva-soaked cheesecloth, a performance-of-a-performance that was originally designed to defy the material limits of this world. In this regard, MacWilliam

¹⁸From MacWilliam’s notes to art writer Martha Langford in 2009, provided by the artist via email, January 28, 2012.

¹⁹MacWilliam, “My Adventures in the Supernormal,” 9.

emphasizes the spirit photograph's role as a document of human action and material culture. "The point is that these photographs document something," she tells interviewer Diane Smyth. "Mediums were often accused of swallowing cheesecloth and regurgitating it to produce ectoplasm—even if that were the case, I would consider it an amazing feat in itself."²⁰ This notion of materiality is a crucial aspect of MacWilliam's work, which traffics in the material traces of immaterial phenomena. Such questions of materiality and embodiment posed in the context of ghostly spirits and unseen forces can be read as coming from a desire to apply earthbound terms to a paradigm of magical thinking that has abandoned the inherent boundaries of the possible. The profound levels of complexity, deep-seated discord and ever-shifting definitions of "truth" that permeated the conflict in Northern Ireland could be understood as giving rise to such a desire. MacWilliam sustains paradoxical tension in her work—even in her discussion of it. In her description of spirit photographs of mediums who produce ectoplasm, she points to the physical act of willful regurgitation as "an amazing feat," but she never claims the production of ectoplasm to be impossible. She qualifies the scenario—"even if that were the case"—allowing for both magical and earthbound readings of the same act.

The Last Person generates a tension between an overtly physical human-ness and earthly materiality (exemplified in the extreme close-up of MacWilliam's mouth) and an immaterial realm of spirits and other-worldly phenomena. The piece alternates between stark video footage of MacWilliam in 1930s-era séance drag, and illusionistic still photographs of the artist in various states of performed trance, overcome by a vortex of swirling ectoplasmic light, aesthetically beautiful compositions that could have functioned as compelling evidence of spirit visitors from The Beyond during Helen

²⁰Diane Smyth, "Spirit Level," *British Journal of Photography* 156 (June 3, 2009): 17.

Duncan's time. The disjuncture produced by the juxtaposition of overt artifice and compelling illusion establishes a dialectic between movement of the video sections (representing living earthbound materiality) and stillness of the spirit photographs (representing the realm of the dead, an otherworldly immateriality). This self-conscious juxtaposition of artifice and illusion works against the possibility of reading the work as inherently spooky or ghostly. This would suggest that MacWilliam's aim is not to produce occult effects but rather to interrogate the impulse to produce such effects. To this end, she researches and represents an idiosyncratic history of occult and paranormal practitioners, accumulating a cast of motley characters, from those of the past such as Helen Duncan to those of the very recent present such as Dr. William G. Roll (who passed away in 2012).

MacWilliam emphasizes embodiment and materiality through installations constructed to involve the viewer as subject as well as outside observer. In order to see specific aspects of the work, especially the filmic ones, viewers must physically interact with the work, sometimes being forced into uncomfortable physical positions in order to do so. Such demands for viewer contortion include the oddly-positioned viewing holes in *Headbox* (2004) (Figure 3), which are so awkward they require handles to maintain the viewer's position, and the hard chair and video monitor placed on the floor in *Experiment M* (1999) (Figure 4). The armchair in *Kuda Bux* (2003) (Figure 5) may not have been uncomfortable, but the viewer is forced to become part of the work, to be put on view herself, and in that way is set up as a specimen or object of observation. *Stereoscopes* (an ongoing project that began in 1999 and continues into the present) explores the vintage technology of 3-D stereoscopic viewing, and requires physical

interaction by viewers, a vulnerable position in which they must stand close to the gallery wall with their backs exposed.

Although MacWilliam seems to go out of her way to avoid producing occult effects that associate with images of ghosts and other occult paranormal phenomena, she teases out spooky qualities in banal and domestic spaces of the physical world such as storage closets (*Library* (2008)) (Figure 6) and family kitchens (*Explaining Magic to Mercer* (2005)) (Figure 7), consistently hinting at occult and paranormal phenomena located in the everyday. For example, in *On the Eye* (2002) (Figure 8), a three-channel video projection, the luminous effects seen in a lightning storm, the strobing light of ceiling fans and flickering of a misty mountain, effects achieved through unremarkable means, are foregrounded as signifiers of the otherworldly. In *Psychic Edit* (2008) (Figure 9) MacWilliam weaves found footage from the archives of renowned psychic from the 1930s, Eileen Garrett, creating a “strobe” effect by intercutting scenes frame-by-frame, generating the uncanny sense that one scene bleeds directly into another, the feeling of being in one place but continually being reminded in quick flashes of someplace else. *After Image* (2002) (Figure 10) incorporates footage from Dario Argento’s obscure 1971 film *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (Italy) and *Los Muertos Hablan* (Gabriel Soria, 1935, Mexico) intercut with footage shot by the artist, working with the far-flung notion that the eyes at the time of death function as a camera, so that if someone has been murdered it would be possible to determine the identity of the murderer by extracting the visual imprint from the eyes of the dead. Extreme close-ups of a human eye become imbued with supernatural possibility, set against a sound-track of the most banal auditory sources, tweeting birds, a ticking clock—all subject to the sense of eeriness,

unworldliness, overlaid with a specter of death and hauntedness. These real-world special effects are yet another way in which MacWilliam's almost pragmatic, material culture productions are grounded in a reality that remains tethered to the here and now, and in that way sustains a link to real-world phenomena. Through a process of addressing the pursuit of an "other world" of occult and paranormal phenomena while continuously pointing to this one, the work subtly insists on being read socially, historically, politically, even if the artist makes no such claim for literal narrative correlation. The tensions produced in MacWilliam's paradoxical constructions demand a faceted and complex analysis that can't disallow for a contextualized reading that would include the conflict in Northern Ireland.

This blurring of the otherworldly with the banality of this one is a recurring theme in MacWilliam's work. The purview of *The Perfect Medium*, a comprehensive exhibition of spirit photography that took place at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, was relegated to the period from 1870 to 1930. According to the curators of that exhibition, after 1930, photography lost its frisson and its capacity to enthrall viewers in a magical way. Photography, after 1930, became, in a word, "banal."²¹ None of MacWilliam's work dealing with occult and paranormal themes, beginning with *The Last Person* (1998) and continuing through *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N* (2009) (Figure 11), draws from events before 1930. The paranormal in MacWilliam's work will always push back against magical readings. The work engages the realm of the paranormal to enframe ideas about the pursuit of such phenomena, about the people who pursue such phenomena, about an artist who

²¹"After 1930, its use became omnipresent in research; it became banal in every sense of the word." Clément Chéroux, *The Perfect Medium*: *Photography and the Occult* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2005), 15.

researches such research and discovers a world of characters and histories that compel her, rather than attempting via the work to produce occult effects or even to comment on occult or paranormal phenomena, *per se*. If magic exists anywhere in the work, it is, paradoxically, to be found in earthbound phenomena such as in the flickering light of a library of rare occult books, in the bizarre apparatus of mortal researchers of the paranormal, in the words and gestures of the people she interviews.

MacWilliam's 1997 installation, *Curtains*, at the Art Project Centre in Dublin, was a harbinger of her future work. The piece took the form of an empty room with sculptural wall-mounted grids, each module of which contained a curtain-like form of plasticine modeling clay, the same material, as one reviewer noted, that is used in stop-motion animation.²² Indeed, talking about this work, the artist emphasizes an interest in movement as part of her original desire to begin working in video.²³ In addition to the cinematic implications of its physical medium, *Curtains* referenced the curtains used in theaters and cinemas, generating an anticipatory tension of something about to happen, something about to move, both the curtains themselves and the emergent, active other-world of theater and film about to be revealed.²⁴ The image of curtains reappears in several of MacWilliam's video projects, including *The Last Person*, and recurs in works such as *Experiment M* (Figure 12), *Kuda Bux* (Figure 13), and *Dermo Optics* (2006)

²²Luke Clancy alludes to the animated film series *Wallace and Gromit* in describing MacWilliam's use of plasticine modeling clay. Luke Clancy, "Susan MacWilliam," *The Irish Times* (Dublin, Northern Ireland, May 26, 1997), sec. Reviews.

²³"*Curtains* hinted at movement and theatre . . . [the work] took plasticine, a material normally used on a small-scale, and pushed it to an extreme. I became curious about making work that would use moving images, so I started using video." Katy Deepwell, *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland* (London; New York: Distributed by Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 117.

²⁴"A recent work consisting of an installation of large bas relief Plasticine sculptures of theatre and cinema curtains alluded to a *sense of anticipation* and space of escape." [Italics are mine.] MacWilliam, "My Adventures in the Supernormal," 3, 4.

(Figure 14). This impulse of *motion* is a recurring trope in MacWilliam's work. It originates in her desire to evolve from static installations to working with "images that move." It can be found in MacWilliam's exploration of occult and paranormal research, where the idea of motion takes on meanings of the reanimated return of the dead, the tilting of tables by unseen spirits, and the telepathic movement of a thought from one mind to another. In *Some Ghosts* (2009), Dr. William G. Roll recalls out-of-body "fly-ins" between New York City and Durham, North Carolina.

MacWilliam establishes a continuum between seen and unseen, sight and sightlessness. In her pre-2005 works, these themes are expressed consistently through the literal suppression of the eyes and face. In the video sequences of *The Last Person*, MacWilliam-as-Duncan's face is never seen in full, the top of her head from the eyes up is often cut from the frame, with the exception of one fleeting side-view (in which her eyes are clamped shut), and in the illusionistic stills her face is never shown in close-up, and it is always blurred. The Kuda Bux figure's head and face are always covered, and the Rosa Kuleshova figure in the video for *Headbox* (Figure 15) is only seen as a headless body entering the apparatus designed for controlled study of her purported ability to read through her fingers. We see arms and hands extended through holes in a wooden screen cutting out archival pictures of Kuleshova, depicted wearing a black eye-covering mask. By drawing attention to issues of sight and sightlessness, MacWilliam pushes for increased awareness of the constructedness of images and a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the presence of the camera.

Between 1998 and 2005, MacWilliam continued her research-driven work in the realm of occult and paranormal phenomena, which resulted in performative reenactment-

type projects, in which she perpetuated her role as “medium.” Her installation, *Kuda Bux*, was based on the New York mystic and performer from the 1930s who demonstrated “eyeless sight.” Bux would go through elaborate, theatrical gestures of suppression of his capacity to see, by first covering his closed eyes with raw dough and then wrapping his face and head in an elaborate turban to ensure sightlessness, followed by his performing feats such as reading the newspaper or copying words on a chalkboard. MacWilliam’s installation includes the name “Kuda Bux” in marquis-style illuminated text mounted on the wall, each letter dotted with a line of bright electrical bulbs. A 1950s style television is set is placed in front of a 1930s armchair in which the viewer sits to watch MacWilliam’s video.²⁵ The video juxtaposes original footage of Kuda Bux in performance with video of MacWilliam costumed as Bux, replete with bandaged head and face, sightlessly writing out figures and texts in chalk. The work is a meditation on vision and visuality, with camera pans that almost tactilely pour across pages of rare books on the subject of vision and sequences where the artist’s hands carefully present and stack black and white archival images of Bux and vintage medical photographs depicting the anatomy of the human eye. MacWilliam’s consistent foregrounding of issues of vision and visuality, sight and sightlessness, suggests underlying issues of truth and belief, as in the notion that “seeing is believing,” which in turn resonates with the kinds of destabilized and contested meanings that serve as barriers to clarity and understanding in the context of violent social conflict, a topic I address in the next chapter.

²⁵Years identifying vintage of the television set and the armchair are indicated by the artist on her website. <http://www.susanmacwilliam.com/kudabux.htm>

MacWilliam incorporated herself as figure/performer/medium in much of her work until 2005, when she developed a new strategy of engagement with her subject of occult and paranormal phenomena. In her pivotal installation and video work, *Explaining Magic to Mercer*, the artist voids her person from view and in so doing marks a new mode of production, taking herself as living effigy out of the picture and replacing her visible self with living interview subjects. In this inaugural video, MacWilliam interviews her five-year old nephew, interrogating him about all the historical figures of the occult she has dealt with in her work thus far. During the course of the video, MacWilliam and Mercer discuss the materialization medium, Helen Duncan (*The Last Person* (1999)), the levitation medium, Kathleen Goligher (*Experiment M* (1999)), the clairvoyant schizophrenic, Mollie Fancher (*The Persistence of Vision* (2000)), the mystic who performed “eyeless sight,” Kuda Bux (*Kuda Bux* (2003)), and the woman who could read through her fingertips, Rosa Kuleshova (*Headbox* (2004)). We see the young boy at a kitchen counter, drawing and talking with his aunt, asking and answering questions from an off-camera MacWilliam. In this work, MacWilliam functions as much as a spectral presence as artist/aunt. Not only is she unseen, but the sound of her voice has been excised from the video, replaced by white subtitles against a field of black. The child can also be read as a spirit medium in this piece; he communicates with a silent, invisible presence. The work functions as a concise recap of MacWilliam’s work in the realm of occult and paranormal research up until that point, bringing viewers up to speed by naming key figures and their peculiar traits in a manner both simplistic enough for a bright child of five to engage in, yet deeply complex in its unanswered questions and in the uncertain space between Mercer’s inquiries and MacWilliam’s attempts to clarify.

He persists in his attempts to grasp notions such as “ectoplasmic rods” that supposedly were produced from the body of the medium Kathleen Goligher and lifted tables into the air. “But how?” he asks repeatedly, as he spells out Goligher’s name in shaky but determined block letters. “Nobody knows,” appears silently at the bottom of the screen.

Since *Explaining Magic to Mercer*, MacWilliam’s work has continued to focus on people in the world of occult and paranormal research, but her focus has turned to the living, if only to help her contact the dead. Several of MacWilliam’s projects have been outgrowths of her relationship with the daughter and granddaughter of the psychic Eileen Garrett, founder of the Psychical Research Foundation in New York in the 1930s. MacWilliam has produced several works based on archival research and interview footage on the subject of Garrett, including *Eileen* (2008), *13 Roland Gardens* (2007) (Figure 16), *Psychic Edit* (2008) and *The Only Way to Travel* (2008). Dr. William G. Roll, psychologist and self-described poltergeist investigator and paranormal researcher, has appeared in *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N* as well as in her video portrait of him, *Some Ghosts*.

MacWilliam describes her relationship with her living subjects as part of the work. She has continued to develop a holistic view of her practice, demonstrating a kind of permeability, the capacity to work between worlds, the world of occult and paranormal research and the world of contemporary art. The following chapter will explore yet another world, that of Northern Ireland, 1969 to the present, where MacWilliam’s chosen field of occult and paranormal research doubles back on itself and can be understood as being both separate from—and entirely resonant with—a history of violent conflict.

CHAPTER 2

THE TROUBLES – DISCOURSE AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

In the past MacWilliam has made video work on everything from table tilting to eyeless sight. She does not commit to a belief in the paranormal herself, but admits to being drawn to the historical nature of the stories that she explores in her art.²⁶

The repeated articulation of the unanswered question is at the center of MacWilliam's work and at the center of the research of occult and paranormal phenomena. MacWilliam's work homes in on that ambiguity, that space of uncertainty, and the physical apparatus, enactments and interactions that effloresce in that uncertainty. According to Hélène Cixous, it is the "nature of incertitude" that lies at the center of the Freudian uncanny.²⁷ In this regard, MacWilliam's work communicates a variant of the Freudian uncanny, in its confluence of the ghostly and the Everyday described in the previous chapter. A condition of uncertainty is perpetuated by MacWilliam in works that refuse facile categorization, that deal with issues of occult and paranormal research while refusing to generate spooky effects, focusing instead on the people who practice and investigate such phenomena and the material infrastructure built up to support such practice. MacWilliam pushes for uncertainty by placing an emphasis on vision and visuality through works that focus on the suppression of sight and by devoting years to an

²⁶Circular wordings such as this speak to the complexities and sensitivities surrounding cultural production in Northern Ireland. For example, what is it about historical narratives that would qualify MacWilliam's engagement with the paranormal and would require an "admission" of interest by the artist? Lee Henry, "Susan MacWilliam," *Cultural Journal, Culture Northern Ireland*, December 3, 2009, <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/2523/susan%20macwilliam/0/0/1/susan-macwilliam>.

²⁷Hélène Cixous et al., "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The 'Uncanny')," *New Literary History* 7, no. 3 (April 1, 1976): 525–645.

art practice that deals with a community whose held beliefs stretch credulity to a breaking point without letting her own views on the subject ever be known. The condition of uncertainty so forcefully articulated in MacWilliam's work reflects a broader condition of the discourse and cultural production surrounding The Troubles, which will be the focus of this chapter.

MacWilliam has been making artwork on the subject of occult and paranormal research for over a decade, and she has never allowed her position as to a belief or disbelief in the field to be known. In her interview with MacWilliam, Katy Deepwell asks, "Do you believe in these mediums? Do you think they're frauds or tricksters?" MacWilliam responds that her opinion does not matter.²⁸ When the author of this paper author met the artist, one of the first questions put forth was about the artist's belief in paranormal phenomena. It was August 2011, and MacWilliam had just completed a residency at the Rhine Center at Duke University. Started by Joseph B. Rhine in 1935, the Rhine Center was created to formally study occult and paranormal phenomena, such as extra-sensory perception, telekinesis, the capacity to communicate with spirits of the dead, and other forms of what was once called psychical research. MacWilliam said that she does not discuss her belief or disbelief in the subject.

Considering MacWilliam's non-position as to her own belief or disbelief in occult and paranormal phenomena leads to a related question, which has to do with what it might mean to refrain from taking a position in a social context of intense conflict. In what can be understood as a parallel configuration, MacWilliam also refrains from making work that has overt or literal associations to the political conflict in Northern

²⁸Deepwell, *Dialogues*, 118, 119.

Ireland, the epicenter of which was Belfast, MacWilliam's place of birth in 1969, and where she continues to live to this day.²⁹ Given her context of having lived in Belfast, Northern Ireland, from her own birth, which was also the birth year of The Troubles, through to the present, the artist's act of maintaining a non-position in the highly contested field of occult and paranormal research resonates with the question of what it might mean to refuse to take a position in the center of a zone of intense conflict such as The Troubles. This chapter will explore other modes of cultural production that have arisen in the context of The Troubles. Some work deals directly with political themes, other work refuses such themes. A through-line, however, within the cultural production and discourse surrounding The Troubles are themes of death, grief, loss and mourning, and the related themes of haunting and hauntedness. The third major theme of this paper, that of contested meanings, is also present, as seen in the conflicting reports of what kind of art is being made in contemporary Northern Ireland. Such reports range from claims that very few artists make Troubles art, all artists make Troubles art, the art of The Troubles has been suppressed, to the question of "Troubles burn-out," suggesting the form has been overly dealt with to such an extent as to have lost its significance.

The conflict in Northern Ireland that came to be known as The Troubles began that same year, with an attack by Loyalists (a predominantly Protestant faction who claimed loyalty to Britain and British rule) on student civil rights demonstrators. Rioting and violence between Loyalists and Republicans (predominantly Catholic, for a United Ireland and the overthrow of British rule) during that year culminated in the occupation of Belfast and Derry by British military. The level of complexity of The Troubles far

²⁹MacWilliam divides her time between Belfast and Dublin, where she is a lecturer at the The National College of Art and Design.

exceeds the scope of this paper; however, the persistence and volatility of contested meanings surrounding the conflict is central to the themes discussed here. The conflict raged through 1998, when an accord was reached via The Good Friday Agreement, a multi-party agreement designed to establish dialogue and to put an end to violent conflict. However, a chronology of The Troubles by Paul Dixon and Eamon O’Kane in their book, *Northern Ireland since 1969* shows evidence of conflict continuing through 2010.³⁰ This is confirmed by authors Aaron Edwards and Cillian McGrattan in their book, *The Northern Ireland Conflict: A beginners guide* (Oxford, 2010), who report documented incidents of violence escalating after the Good Friday Agreement was concluded, and describe a condition of potential for violence that endures on a daily basis in Northern Ireland.³¹

This chapter will seek to establish a subtle yet significant set of associations between MacWilliam’s work and the social, political and cultural context of The Troubles. While the artist works outside of any literal or overt form of political aesthetic practice, there are traceable and deeply rooted themes that align MacWilliam’s work with the discourse and cultural production surrounding The Troubles.

Maintaining a non-position for over a decade, during which an artist’s production is based exclusively on a subject that is so contested, so questionable, so marginalized, as the study of the occult and the paranormal, requires a rigorous self-discipline, a choice to monitor one’s own responses, never letting slip indications of belief or non-belief. Such

³⁰Paul Dixon and Eamonn O’Kane, *Northern Ireland Since 1969* (Harlow, England □; New York: Longman, 2011), xiv.

³¹Aaron Edwards and Cillian McGrattan, *The Northern Ireland Conflict: a Beginner’s Guide* (Oneworld, 2010), 106, 108.

discipline drives home the degree to which MacWilliam has invested in blurring boundaries between art and life in a practice that allows for “coincidences and connections” to be part of the work, and the lengths she is willing to go to sustain her own permeability as a medium or go-between among the delineated worlds of contemporary art and paranormal research.³² There is a functional aspect to MacWilliam’s non-disclosure of her opinions. By not providing access to her own point of view as to the veracity of the claims of her subjects, MacWilliam puts viewers in the uneasy position of needing to respond to the work at face value. Because there are no overt cues or obvious judgments provided, viewers are faced with their own relationship to such claims. Just as she literally puts viewers in uncomfortable positions as they engage in the viewing apparatus of her installations, MacWilliam refuses them the comfort of knowing what side the artist comes down on and in so doing sustains ambiguity in the work.

MacWilliam’s video, *13 Roland Gardens* (2007), is a compilation of interviews with family and people who knew the celebrity psychic Eileen Garrett, discussing an apartment she kept in South Kensington, London, in the 1930s where several famous séances took place. MacWilliam’s subjects, Garrett’s daughter, Eileen Coly, granddaughter, Lisette Coly, Dr. William G. Roll and Dr. Stanley Krippner (described as a “psychologist and academic”) come off as thoughtful, inquisitive, intelligent people. They make reasonable points, as when Garrett’s daughter, Eileen Coly, now in her 80s, asks “[What] it comes down to, is there any continuation of anything?” Such philosophical comments are juxtaposed with mundane descriptions of the London flat –

³²In this regard, the artist’s willingness to meet me when she was in residence at the Rhine Center, the day before she was to return to Belfast, strikes me as being related to her interest in and pursuit of “coincidences and connections.”

furniture placement and floor plan. If one were to ask, “What is this video about?” one might be hard-pressed to say. The fragmentation of material provides more of a series of impressions and personalities than any sense of linear story-telling. The video is constructed in such a way that the psychic aspects of Garrett’s life and work are profoundly integrated with the banalities of everyday life. *13 Roland Gardens*, and all of MacWilliam’s work, is carefully non-judgmental. The viewer is lead into a world of alternative beliefs through compelling personalities and the comfort of cozy domestic interiors in which the interviews are conducted.

The fringe theories and marginalized beliefs put forth in MacWilliam’s work offer potentially polarizing differences in world views. If the artist were to reveal her position about the paranormal, it would change the viewer’s s relationship to her work, which, in its treatment of ideas about the afterlife, of ghosts, of telekinesis, telepathy and other forms of paranormal phenomena, constitutes a crisis in the definition of “the real.” MacWilliam’s refusal highlights the fact that commonly held beliefs can generate a space of ease, whereas beliefs that are counter to our own create a space of alienation and even distrust. MacWilliam’s refusal to disclose her position reinforces these tensions. By refusing to provide her own belief or disbelief about occult and paranormal phenomena, MacWilliam places a barrier between her work and the viewer. We are not given access to the artist’s opinion, so we are left without a sense of allegiance or alienation in terms of beliefs. Does the work profess a wholesale embrace of such phenomena? Or does it critique the far-flung ideas of its subjects? The ambiguities generated in MacWilliam’s work puts the onus on the viewer to acknowledge his or her own construction of the “real.” We are implicated in this work merely by looking at it.

We are also implicated in this work by writing about it. MacWilliam's art sustains a particular relationship to the writing that gets done about it, inasmuch as her work bears the earmarks of the archival, seen in references to archival images and text in *Experiment M*, oral history in *13 Roland Gardens*, and the sheer presence of documents and books in *Library* (2008). Michael Wilson, writing in *Artforum*, refers to MacWilliam as a "research artist."³³ To write about MacWilliam's work is also to participate in it, to contribute to the archive. Art writers are not immune from the acid test of MacWilliam's ambiguous artwork. Texts about the work often reveal judgments and held beliefs on the slippery subject of the paranormal. The mere act of writing in general will always bring a writer's held beliefs to the fore, but the act of describing MacWilliam's work reveals a polarizing effect in which writers appear to have been especially triggered by the work in such a way that unchecked biases can emerge. The variation in response reveals beliefs that exist on a wide spectrum. Martha Langford echoes William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* in the title for her essay on MacWilliam, "Varieties of Psychical Experience" and thereby affirms "psychical experience" as a possibility rather than a fantasy.³⁴ Then there are writers like Brian Dillon who do not mince words, who emphasize a gap between (rational) non-believers such as himself and (irrational) believers. Dillon takes an exoticizing approach that alludes to an almost ethnographic otherness:

One of the uncanny effects of [MacWilliam's] approach is that she has at this stage insinuated herself quite some way into the occult community,

³³Michael Wilson, "Susan MacWilliam: Jack the Pelican Presents," *Artforum International* 46, no. 10 (July 15, 2008): 443.

³⁴Martha Langford, "Varieties of Psychical Experience," in Susan MacWilliam and Karen Downey, *Remote Viewing* (London, UK: Black Dog Pub., 2008).

become a trusted collaborator of its delusional members. She has begun to speak their language, and at the time of writing was busy constructing a séance cabinet in her studio.³⁵

Wilson carefully refers to the subject of Dermo-Optics (dealt with by MacWilliam in her video of the same name) as an “eccentric-seeming theory,”³⁶ a qualifying construction that belies a hesitancy to stake a reality claim. While all cultural writing can be excavated for revealed truths about the beliefs of the people who produce it, MacWilliam’s work, by design, by virtue of the ambiguities generated by her non-position, gives rise to texts that speak to varying degrees of perceptual bias, and which take on a new life as part of an archival continuum built up around the work. MacWilliam’s blurring of art and life by allowing her relationships, travels, communications and chance meetings to exist as part of her work expands the frame through which the work can be considered, destabilizes the definitions of where the work begins and ends, and thus would allow for the possibility that critical writing generated about the work could also productively be read as part of the work.

The conflicting views revealed in writings about MacWilliam’s work are notably consonant with the conflicting views played out in the discourse surrounding cultural production in connection with the conflict in Northern Ireland, which in turn reflects the maelstrom of contested meanings in connection with the conflict itself. As Dixon and O’Kane have pointed out, the controversies engendered in Northern Ireland surrounding the conflict were forged through extreme violence. They also make it clear that “[c]ompeting stories are told about the course of events since 1969 in order to justify

³⁵Brian Dillon, “Jeremy Millar & Susan MacWilliam,” *Art Review* (London, England), no. 30 (March 2009): 88.

³⁶Wilson, “Susan MacWilliam.”

contemporary bargaining positions and to gain political advantage in the ongoing negotiations of the peace process.”³⁷ This condition of conflicting assertions, also seen in response to MacWilliam’s work, gets played out in the discourse surrounding cultural production in connection with The Troubles as well.

The following four scenarios indicate the contested, indeed, contradictory claims that have been made about “Troubles Art”:

1. Few Northern Irish artists have addressed The Troubles.

It would stand to reason that the discourse surrounding the establishment of a “Troubles Museum” would reverberate with ideological and philosophical questions as to how such a museum would function. In her article titled “Creating a museum of the Troubles would be messy and complex, but is that an argument for not doing it?” Elizabeth Crooke cites key issues of “authorship, authority, truth and transparency” required to produce a viable and sustainable project.³⁸ In another article addressing the possibility of a “Troubles Museum,” James Morrison quotes Andrea Rea, Troubles archivist for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), as indicating there has not been a lot of political art:

As for the difficulty of ‘imposing’ objectivity on an archive culled from a period of civil war, [Andrea] Rea argues that, in spite of circumstances, in which they were produced, few works display sectarian bias: ‘The arts appear to have been one arena where divisions weren’t so apparent. Most of the art doesn’t make political points. It’s often difficult to identify a particular artist as Protestant or Catholic.’³⁹

³⁷Paul Dixon and Eamonn O’Kane, *Northern Ireland Since 1969* (Harlow, England; New York: Longman, 2011), 4.

³⁸Elizabeth Crooke, “Creating a Museum of the Troubles Would Be Messy and Complex, but Is That an Argument for Not Doing It?,” *Museums Journal* 108, no. 6 (June 2008): 16.

³⁹James Morrison, “Contested History,” *Museums Journal* 109, no. 6 (June 2009): 25.

Describing his experience as guest curator for the 2001 EV&A exhibition in Limerick, Salah Hassan described a mostly apolitical group of entries, of “fine” quality and virtually indistinguishable from other work being done in Europe:

Distributed over three main venues, and some 14 subsidiary venues, it is a substantial affair, but it was not difficult, he says, to find 80-plus works for inclusion. ‘The standard was very fine,’ he reports. ‘There was very cutting edge work there, pretty much in sync with what is happening globally. I would say it does remain very much within the European vein in terms of art production. That is, it is not particularly different from art produced in Sweden, say: it’s clean, neat, interchangeable. In a way I was surprised, given the many political issues in Ireland, not to find more of a political edge. After all, Irish society is going through its most important transformation since the Famine.’⁴⁰

2. All Northern Irish artists have addressed The Troubles.

At the other end of the spectrum of discourse we find arts writer Sarah McAvera referring to a phenomenon so ubiquitous it has a name, “‘Troubles’ art.” For McAvera, even the question of the impact of The Troubles on art is beside the point – the impact on art is a given:

“What affect did ‘The Troubles’ have on art in Northern Ireland?” I’ve been asked this question numerous times, as, I would guess, has every other person working in the arts in Northern Ireland. I understand the question, but can’t help feeling that the question is inadequate. Did ‘The Troubles’ affect art in Northern Ireland? Of course they did, how could such a complex and long-lasting socio-political situation fail to?⁴¹

The conflation of Ireland and conflict and the impact on the arts pre-dates the time of The Troubles. In her essay in the *Irish Arts Review*, “Conflicting History,” Rachel Hewson

⁴⁰Aidan Dunne, “Cutting Edge of Multiculturalism,” *The Irish Times* (Limerick, Ireland, February 23, 2001), sec. City Edition; Arts, 14.

⁴¹Sarah McAvera, “Northern Ireland or The Troubles Art,” *Cura.*, September 1, 2010, <http://www.curamagazine.com/en/?p=1486>.

quotes the “much-loved Northern Irish novelist and short-story writer Sam Hanm Bell,” writing in 1951:

‘What of the troubled surface! What has been done to set down those tensions and Loyalties and swift angers that agitate us?’ Wherever one goes in the world, whether it is a seaport on the edge of the Baltic, or a European capital like Bucharest, Amsterdam or Krakow, once you are identified as Northern Irish, then the inevitable question asked is: How has art dealt with the Northern Irish conflict?⁴²

Aileen Blaney also situates the idea of The Troubles as a foregone conclusion in its impact on cultural production. In her essay, “Remembering Historical Trauma in Paul Greengrass’s *Bloody Sunday*,” Blaney establishes a fundamental interplay between the conflict in Northern Ireland and the broader cultural sphere:

Since the instigation of the peace process in Northern Ireland, issues relating to the commemoration of the political conflict there have moved to center stage in media, political, cultural and academic discourses.⁴³

In his review of Locky Morris in *Artforum*, Miguel Amado asserts:

The Troubles not only shaped the political landscape in Northern Ireland in the last third of the twentieth century but also influenced local artistic practice there, leaving a mark on local life and imposing on art an ethical imperative to respond.⁴⁴

In his article on *Hunger*, the first feature film by video artist Steve McQueen, film critic Graham Fuller describes how McQueen “transcends the standard categories of Irish Troubles cinema,” thereby establishing “Troubles Cinema” as a *bona fide* filmic genre,

⁴²Rachel Hewson, “Conflicting Histories,” *Irish Arts Review* 22, no. 4 (December 15, 2005): 102–107.

⁴³Aileen Blaney, “Remembering Historical Trauma in Paul Greengrass’s *Bloody Sunday*,” *History and Memory* 19, no. 2 (October 1, 2007): 113.

⁴⁴Miguel Amado and Clifford E. Landers, “Locky Morris: Golden Thread Gallery /,” *Artforum International* 49, no. 4 (December 2010): 267.

including directors such as Jim Sheridan, Mike Leigh, Pete Travis and Paul Greengrass as practitioners of the form.⁴⁵

3. Troubles-related art has been suppressed.

The Hewson article mentioned above is dedicated to the proposition that works of art dealing with The Troubles have been largely ignored, or worse, suppressed:

The Irish, especially those born well after the Troubles had started, are often, unaware that Northern Ireland is one of the most recognised places on earth, because of thirty years of incessant media coverage. At this point in time, eleven years after the first ceasefire, it is relevant to look back to the period 1969 to 1994 and ask whether art did, indeed, reflect upon the political and social turmoil of the period. The answer, which of course is yes, is one of the most closely guarded secrets in Irish art history. Several generations of artists were written out of this art history and to a large extent still are.⁴⁶

4. “Troubles burnt-out,” “post-conflict society.”

Beyond the question of whether cultural production has been reflective of The Troubles, writers such as McAvera frame The Troubles as a past from which the arts must emerge. Writing in 2001, McAvera laments that, despite the fact that Northern Ireland is a “post-conflict society,” the culture is still understood in the rest of the world as living in the shadow of The Troubles. The same term “post-conflict society” is used by art critic Miguel Amado in *Artforum* to contextualize the work of Locky Morris.⁴⁷ In her interview with Northern Irish artist Rita Duffy, Joanne Savage asks if the artist thinks Northern Ireland is “guilty of being stuck in a ‘Troubles hangover.’”⁴⁸ Daniel Jewesbury,

⁴⁵Graham Fuller, “By Any Means Necessary,” *Film Comment* 45, no. 2 (April 2009): 36.

⁴⁶Hewson, “Conflicting Histories.”

⁴⁷Amado and Landers, “Locky Morris,” 267.

⁴⁸Joanne Savage, “Rita Duffy,” *Culture - Northernireland.org*, January 19, 2010, <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/3020/rita-duffy>.

an arts writer who has collaborated with MacWilliam, suggests that Troubles art is a thing of the past, describing it as part of an evolution of the arts in Northern Ireland that lead to more sophisticated “mature” forms:

In fact, it could be said that art in Northern Ireland really achieved maturity when it shifted away from such a straight-forwardly ‘political’ agenda, framed conception of ‘art,’ and tried to find viable alternatives, socially and artistically. In Belfast, this was the tactic of a number of artist-run groups that developed through the late 1980s and early 1990s, the most notable survivor today being Catalyst Arts.⁴⁹

In his article for *The Irish Times* titled “The Emerging Northern Ireland,” Bryan Coll interviews Karen Downey, who curated MacWilliam’s exhibition for the 2009 Venice Biennale.

For Downey, Venice is a rare opportunity to broaden international perceptions of the North: ‘I think the role of artists today is to create a more complex image for Northern Ireland; one of a diverse, heterogeneous place. It’s essential that we show [the public] other things and counter the reductive image many people have of here.’⁵⁰

Such commentaries complete a spectrum of viewpoints, clarifying only that there is no clarity, certainly there is no consensus, with regard to cultural production in connection with The Troubles.

Very little is written about MacWilliam’s choice not to address The Troubles in her work. Brief mention is made of it by Bryan Coll in the 2008 article in the *Irish Times* mentioned above:

Although Susan MacWilliam’s fields of interests - the supernatural and the paranormal - might signal a conscious move away from Troubles-related art, [curator Karen] Downey is careful to point out that the conflict still has its place in contemporary work. ‘Some of the best pieces being made

⁴⁹Daniel Jewesbury, “Aperto Belfast,” *Flash Art (International Edition)* 34, no. 219 (September 2001): 61.

⁵⁰Bryan Coll, “The Emerging Northern Ireland,” *The Irish Times* (Dublin, Ireland, July 3, 2008).

in the North deal with the legacy of conflict in our collective consciousness. We shouldn't just brush it under the carpet.'⁵¹

Karen Downey curated MacWilliam's exhibition at the 2009 Venice Biennale. The fact that in 2008 she still feels the need to acknowledge that MacWilliam's work is not Troubles-related by pointing to significant work being made by other artists that does address the conflict, speaks to the level of complexity and heightened sensitivities surrounding these questions of cultural production in the very-recent past.⁵² The most substantive text to deal with MacWilliam's choice not to make artwork about The Troubles is written by Noel Kelly:

Born in Belfast, MacWilliam moved to Manchester to study art at Manchester Polytechnic. For her, Belfast was a place of deep-seated family memories and support that provided her with the impetus to get out of an atmosphere where the background of 'The Troubles' was the only identity allowed to artists studying or working in Belfast. Manchester provided a decisive ground for independence from nationalistic, religious and political categorization. This independence has continued to be a prominent part of MacWilliam's practice. Returning to Belfast, and avoided by the hip curatorial visits that would continue to question her reasons for not addressing the political situation, MacWilliam took her apparent 'apartness' as a point of negotiation for a series of bodies of work that continue to this day.⁵³

A scan of the discursive landscape and the cultural production that has emerged from the context of The Troubles, outlined below, can help clarify how MacWilliam's work is both apart and a part of that context, on multiple levels, traceable by recurrent

⁵¹It should be noted that Karen Downey curated MacWilliam's exhibition for the 2009 Venice Biennale, so that her statement here should be read as much as apology and defense of showing a non-Troubles artist as it is in support of Troubles art. Ibid.

⁵²In an article about the possibility of creating a Troubles museum, author James Morrison describes a "minefield of sensitivities" surrounding the cultural production and presentation of works dealing with the conflict in Northern Ireland. Morrison, "Contested History," 25.

⁵³Kelly, "An Outsider in Her Native Town - The Work of Susan MacWilliam."

themes of haunting, hauntedness, death, loss, grief and mourning, evidence, belief and contested conceptions of truth.

* * * * *

Jacques Derrida's antagonist is the metaphysics of presence, the phantom-form of truth that haunts Western culture. Though strain as one will to exorcise the text of Western philosophy, metaphysics, like the relentless poltergeist it is, always reappears elsewhere, sometimes in the body of one's own writing. Thus the work of deconstruction, like the work of psychoanalysis strictly conceived, is never-ending. Haunting is interminable.⁵⁴

I consider the process of making my work as a form of mediumship whereby I bring the past to the present; the dead to the live; one space to another, one world to another and vice versa.⁵⁵

Although MacWilliam set herself apart from pursuing artworks that address social conflict, her choice of themes of the occult and the paranormal double back on themselves to situate her within a matrix of overlapping references to those very themes, socially, culturally, politically. According to Fintan O'Toole, the year 2011 was "a year of ghosts and haunting in Irish art."⁵⁶ In her February of 2011 review titled "Ghost Modernism" about the experimental, site-specific exhibition, *Unbuilding*, held in the Northern Irish town of Bray, Kathryn Waugh coined the phrase "hauntology" as the descriptor of the "zeitgeist of the moment."⁵⁷

⁵⁴Mark Edmundson, "Nightmare on Main Street: Angeles, Sodomasochism and the Culture of Gothic," (1997), in Gilda Williams, *The Gothic* (London: MIT Press, 2007), 31, 32.

⁵⁵Susan MacWilliam—from her [undated—probably 2006/2007] report to NIAC (Northern Ireland Arts Council) provided by email dated January 28, 2012.

⁵⁶Fintan O'Toole, "A Year of Haunting and Ghosts in Irish Art - but the Only Direction Left Is up - The Irish Times - Sat, Dec 24, 2011," *The Irish Times*, n.d., <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2011/1224/1224309458122.html>.

⁵⁷"Bray's ambivalent existence hovers between its ghostly past and fragile present. It is now known more for its film studios at Ardmore (and the transient narratives and constructions contained within this world of cinematic fantasy), and its commuter residents. If 'to haunt' (in Old English 'Hamettan') originally meant to 'provide with a home', then *Unbuilding* with its many layers of association with the Unheimlich sought

Such terms of the occult are ubiquitous in writings on Irish arts and culture. In her 2011 dissertation, *The Ghost in the Irish Psyche: Ghost Stories in Contemporary Irish Literature*, Molly Elizabeth Ferguson correlates the ghost as a metaphor for social anxiety, positing that ghost stories, in which silent ghosts serve as transgressive voices of the voiceless, function as narratives of resistance to colonialism. Richard Jenkins tracks ways in which ghost legends abound in response to social violence, specifically locating such legends as arising and persisting since the onset of The Troubles in 1969 in Northern Ireland.⁵⁸ The first line of Jack Holland's *Too long a sacrifice: life and death in Northern Ireland since 1969* reads, "In the street outside our house was the ghost of a dead policeman." Both Holland's book and Conor Cruise O'Brien's *Ancestral voices: religion and nationalism in Ireland* include chapters titled "Ghosts."

Notions of hauntedness permeate the discourse of violent social conflict in Ireland and in critical works on the subject of cultural production in the wake of such violence. In his book, *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones: Northern Irish poetry and Social Violence* (1999), Jonathan Hufstader describes Seamus Heaney's poem "Station Island" (1984) as centering around the subject of social violence in Northern Ireland. Hufstader describes Heaney in occult terms, suggesting that the poet acts as a spirit medium in the way in which he "listens to the ghost of William Carleton (1794-1869)," who converted from Catholicism to the "Established church," in order for Carleton to separate himself from

to give a home to an extraordinarily challenging curatorial programme." Katherine Waugh, "Ghost Modernism," *The Visual Artist's News Sheet*, February 2011, <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/72087067/Visual-Artists-News-Sheet-January---February-2011>.

⁵⁸Willem de Blécourt and Owen Davies, *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe* (Manchester University Press, 2005), 202.

“rituals of tribal violence.”⁵⁹ Heaney’s poem focuses on a strategy of emancipation from oppressive social institutions that perpetuate divisiveness, in “Station Island” taking the form of an historical figure who separates from the Catholic church. Hufstader, writing about Heaney’s invocation of Carleton formalizes this impulse: “To complete his emancipation from violence, he must now write out his emancipation from religion.”⁶⁰ Heaney’s paradigm of emancipation through separation from institutions is structurally consonant with MacWilliam’s apartness from the dominant paradigms of politicized art of The Troubles, which can be read in MacWilliam’s self-described “space of escape” in her work, *Curtains* (1997).⁶¹ Hufstader’s use of ghostly presence and hauntedness is consistent with an occult rhetoric surrounding The Troubles.

In her analysis of the work of the Irish filmmaker, Neil Jordan, Maria Pramaggiore unpacks the notion of ghost as figure of repressed traumas of both the past and of the present, linked specifically to the conflict in Northern Ireland.⁶² Eva Urban’s overview of contemporary Northern Irish Drama describes a ghost in a play by Martin Lynch, sarcastically asking itself questions, and, with a Brechtian self-reflexivity, answering them, describing the site of its birth: “Born! In a hovel. Where! Here. (*With*

⁵⁹Jonathan Hufstader, *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones: Northern Irish Poetry and Social Violence* (University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 60.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹The term “space of escape” used by MacWilliam in this article is ambiguous, and indeed, to some extent cryptic. Because the article appeared in *The Paranormal Review*, we can consider the artist may have been speaking to her readers of a “space of escape” in occult or paranormal terms, perhaps suggesting the idea of an escape to a world beyond this one. However, the idea that an artist would construct for herself a “space of escape” suggests a desire to escape, which in turn suggests that one’s own reality is in some way oppressive and therefore associable to the artist’s immediate context of Belfast, Northern Ireland, and the enduring conflict there. MacWilliam, “My Adventures in the Supernormal,” 3, 4.

⁶²“In the case of Jordan’s ghost stories, however, disputes over the literal and figurative borders of the Irish nation are not merely a matter of repressed trauma: the ongoing conflict over the status of Northern Ireland is a present-day reminder of the critical importance of unresolved historical events.” Maria Pramaggiore, *Neil Jordan* (University of Illinois Press, 2008), 49.

sarcasm.) A lovely wee hovel in the lovely, beautiful and bountiful slums of Belfast.”⁶³

This soliloquy delivered by a ghost represents a conflation of hauntedness and social/political commentary that can be seen at multiple intersections of culture and conflict that recur within the arts generated in Northern Ireland in connection with The Troubles.

A similarly self-reflexive impulse is at work in MacWilliam’s work, evidenced in the inclusion of the artist’s presence in her work, such as in the works between 1998 and 2005 in which she took on the personae of historical occult figures such as Helen Duncan and including her own presence during interviews as in *Explaining Magic to Mercer* and *Some Ghosts*, as well as in her juxtaposition of occult and paranormal themes with domestic and mundane conditions. The conflation of hauntedness and social/political commentary in contemporary Northern Irish culture is sufficiently ubiquitous so that MacWilliam’s work cannot be read as wholly separate from such a reading.

In the introduction to their book *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg talk about the relationship between visual culture and historical modernity and how that relationship shifts when trauma becomes part of the equation. They state as a central tenet that art is one of several possible outcomes as a response to trauma.⁶⁴ Trauma studies, echoing Freud’s originary return of the repressed, reiterate the need for emancipation through the lens of hauntedness. Dominick De LaCapra describes the importance of “laying ghosts to rest,” and “distancing oneself from

⁶³Eva Urban, *Community Politics and the Peace Process in Contemporary Northern Irish Drama* (Peter Lang, 2010), 83.

⁶⁴Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg, eds., *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity* (Dartmouth, 2006), ix, x.

haunting revenants.”⁶⁵ Jill Bennett tells us that “To be in the grip of sense memory is, by definition, to remain haunted by memory that resists cognitive processing.”⁶⁶ David Lloyd formulates the impossibility of redress when he writes, “For the restlessness of the dead stems from the lack of a future fit for them, and only the unfitting can address the ghosts that rise like vapors through the disjointed frame of the present.”⁶⁷ The discourse of trauma studies relies on the spirit world to do some of its psychic heavy lifting.

In addition to a far-reaching imprint of occult and paranormal themes on the discourse surrounding The Troubles and the language of trauma studies, such themes are also traceable to contemporary art production in Northern Ireland. References to ghosts and hauntedness are made in works by artists making direct associations to The Troubles as well as by artists who make no such claim. Given the permeability of the thematic matrix of death, grief, loss and mourning, with its attendant qualities that lead to occult notions of a spirit world, ghosts and hauntedness, and the philosophical questions of belief, truth and contested meanings that arise with such occult notions, works of art made by contemporary artists in Northern Ireland that deal with such themes can be considered as being traceable to The Troubles, as legible indices of a continuum of discourse. MacWilliam’s work needs to be included in this category.

A cursory overview of recent work will provide a sense of these pervasive themes. Perhaps the most well-known Northern Irish artist, whose work has also dealt directly with The Troubles, is Willie Doherty. Doherty’s recent video, *Ghost Story*

⁶⁵Paul K. Saint-Amour, “Bombing and the Symptom: Traumatic Earliness and the Nuclear Uncanny,” *Diacritics* 30, no. 4 (December 1, 2000): 62.

⁶⁶Jill Bennett, “Dis/Identification: Art, Affect, and the ‘Bad Death’: Strategies for Communicating the Sense Memory of Loss,” *Signs* 28, no. 1 (2002): 340.

⁶⁷David Lloyd, “The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger,” *Representations* 92, no. 1 (November 1, 2005): 153.

(2009), takes the viewer on a dark road trip, with accompanying narrative by actor Stephen Rea that deals with shards of memory, measuring a violent past against an uncertain and somehow mysterious present. Anthony Haughey's *Settlement* (2011) is a series of photographs of "ghost estates," real estate developments that were halted after the global financial crisis of 2008, all of which were shot at night, conveying an eerie desolation. Haughey's work was described in Fintan O'Toole's review of Northern Irish Arts Scene in 2011, whose title was: "A year of haunting and ghosts in Irish art – but the only direction left is up."⁶⁸ David Creedon's photographic series, *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed* (2009), features decaying architecture spaces, domestic realms long abandoned and rich with a sense of residual presence. In 1999 artist Dorothy Cross created *Ghost Ship*, a site-specific homage to the memory of the "light ships" that used to protect Ireland's coastal channels. The work is a full-scale former military ship painted in a luminous fluorescent green and glows in the harbor at night. A 2008 article in *Circa* magazine titled "Exit Ghost" chronicled the performative birth and ritual death of Irish-American artist Brian O'Doherty's alter-ego "Patrick Ireland." In response to the violence of Bloody Sunday in 1972, the artist performed a name-change ceremony that same year at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin. On May 20, 2008, the Museum of Modern Art in Dublin held a "Troubles funeral" for O'Doherty's figure of art/protest. The burial included a pine casket and a death mask made from the artist's face. Declan Long, the writer of the piece, points out:

If, as Marina Warner notes, death masks have conventionally derived 'their potency from their contact with the actual deceased, with his or her flesh'—these culturally resonant objects being 'the nearest remnant[s] that can be preserved of a body before its disintegration or embalming'—then

⁶⁸O'Toole, "A Year of Haunting and Ghosts in Irish Art - but the Only Direction Left Is up - The Irish Times - Sat, Dec 24, 2011."

the status or significance of this odd indexical record of an *imagined* identity, a mask made in mourning from the vital features of a living artist, is certainly difficult to determine. In one sense, this pale, plaster sculpture has an inevitably and admirably unresolved ‘character’ suited to an exhibition and event concerned with marking endings and forging new beginnings—properly prompting, through its dual life/ death connotations, contemplation of survival as well as traumatic loss—but it is also dispiritingly suggestive of an atavistic, martyr-centered political rhetoric and is an overtly self-aggrandizing addition to those proceedings when further viewed, as it must be, within the wider contemporary Irish context of confusion, caution and anxiety about commemoration and lasting reconciliation.”⁶⁹

Long’s observations and critical response to O’Doherty’s aesthetic response to *The Troubles* crystalizes the complexities and contested meanings that persist with regard to both the conflict and the cultural production that has culminated in its wake. The fact that Long references ghosts in the title of his essay belies the enduring trope of the occult and hauntedness that accompanies this discourse. MacWilliam’s non-position with regard to her belief or non-belief in the world of occult and paranormal phenomena, and her parallel non-position with regard to her work in connection with the violent conflict in Northern Ireland is nevertheless legibly associated within this discourse of contested meanings—a never-settled condition, or at least, at the time of this writing, an unsettled one.

⁶⁹ Declan Long, “Exit: Ghost,” *Circa: Art Magazine*, no. 125 (October 15, 2008): 47.

CHAPTER 3

VISUAL RHETORIC AND THE PERFORMATIVE – DOING THINGS WITH IMAGES

The first thing we see is a high-speed flurry of still photos, a staccato onslaught of vintage cameras set against brightly colored monochromatic fields: red, turquoise, yellow, bright green. This deluge of split-second cuts gives way to sepia-toned archival images, a nonstop stream of séance room stills from the archive of Thomas Glendenning Hamilton, occult researcher from the 1930s, banal shots of boxes, walls, chairs, lace curtains. Dark hand-numbered vintage title cards count down from 10 to 1 at breakneck speed. Only eight seconds of the video have elapsed, but the artist has already established a self-reflexive dictum: In this work you cannot see an image without imagining the apparatus that produced it. Now we cut to a close-up on the face of Northern Irish poet Ciaran Carson, reading intently from a list, intoning an alphabetical litany of cinematic terms: "...remake, resolver, reversal, reverse shot, rewinds, room tone, rough cut, rushes..." The influences of Hitchcock (occult obsessions) and Godard (self-consciously Brechtian impulses), invoked in the introduction to this paper, are in full effect.

Thus begins Susan MacWilliam's 2009 offering for the Venice Biennale, the video *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N*, which she produced during her residency at the Hamilton archive in Winnipeg, Canada, the year before. There, the artist came across documentation surrounding the purported spontaneous appearance of "teleplasmic" letters in 1931 that spelled out the name of Camille Flammarion (1842–1925), a French

astronomer and psychical researcher. The piece features scenes with Carson as well as with Dr. William G. Roll and includes the recorded voice of Arla Marshall, Canadian granddaughter of Hamilton's Scottish "sitter" or medium, Susan Marshall.⁷⁰

F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N circulates around Hamilton's dubious occult claims, which serve to lay bare a complex range of beliefs, so that, for example, we have Roll, a self-proclaimed parapsychologist and poltergeist investigator, amusedly referring to the apparition of Flammarion's name on the wall of a séance cabinet as "transparently fraudulent." Speaking to Diane Smyth, MacWilliam described her fascination with the relationship between the public and the producers of spirit photographs. "There was an expectation that an image would arise, and disappointment if it didn't. Some mediums might say, 'OK, some images are fraudulent, but it's not because what we do is fraudulent, it's because there's this desire for an image.'" The fraudulence of an image is of less interest to the artist than the fact of its construction, the impulse that brought it into existence and the desire it fulfills. Such shifting viewpoints and destabilized notions of evidence versus fraud lead back to one of the central themes of MacWilliam's work, that of contested meanings.

Refusing to settle into one mode or another, the video flits restlessly in and among archival documentation and sets constructed by the artist that exactly reproduce the Hamilton's séance room, replete with teleplasmic lettering. *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N* intercuts between the original photographs and MacWilliam's meticulous recreations, which are so convincingly produced that the viewer is able to identify the contemporary images solely by the photograph's surface properties, and not by the content of the image.

⁷⁰It is interesting to note that Susan Hamilton, the medium who supposedly channeled the teleplasmic letters spelling out Flammarion's name was Scottish, a trait that links her to Helen Duncan, the subject of *The Last Person*, MacWilliam's first work that dealt with occult and paranormal themes.

MacWilliam relies on the visual literacy of the viewer, the capacity to identify photographic codes—sepia-toned and stained versus pristine color, still photography versus video. Such juxtapositions speak to a literacy of photographic difference and underscores that MacWilliam’s subject is as much about photography itself as it is about occult and paranormal themes.

In their essay, “Like ‘Ghosts who’d Walked Abroad’: Faces of the Bloody Sunday Dead,” (2006) Tom Herron and John Lynch examine the rhetorical power of photographs. Their analysis focuses on images of fourteen men and boys who were victims of the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre.⁷¹ Herron and Lynch track the usages of the photographs of the Bloody Sunday dead as pivotal rhetorical figures that fueled a discourse which culminated in the Saville Inquiry, a British commission formed to bring clarity (if not closure) to the events of Bloody Sunday. Herron and Lynch present the images in their essay in terms that transcend the static capacity of the photograph, focusing instead on the ways in which the images were used.

The notion of rhetoric will be central to our argument that the displaying and parading of the photographs are not just acts of commemoration or of mourning, but are in fact critical interventions—acts of persuasion—in the campaign to persuade the British Government to establish a full and proper Inquiry into the circumstances of the killings.⁷²

In this way the images, as they are wielded by protesters and activists through acts of parade and display, do more than merely signify or serve as forms of visual representation. They are inextricably linked to communicative *actions*. Their rhetorical

⁷¹“Bloody Sunday” refers to January 30, 1972, in Derry, Northern Ireland, when members of the British Parachute Regiment opened fire on fourteen unarmed men and boys as they participated in a civil rights march. Paul Dixon and Eamonn O’Kane, *Northern Ireland Since 1969* (Harlow, England; New York: Longman, 2011). (xv)

⁷²Tom Herron and John Lynch, “Like ‘Ghosts Who’d Walked Abroad’: Faces of the Bloody Sunday Dead,” *Visual Culture in Britain* 7, no. 1 (January 2006): 60.

force is tied to their *use* as opposed to an autonomous function of merely conveying content. The activists in Herron and Lynch's essay "do things with images," much the way J. L. Austin suggested we "do things with words."⁷³ In this way, Austin's term "performative" can be used to describe the use of the images of the Bloody Sunday dead as set forth by Herron and Lynch, in which images are wielded as persuasive means of affecting change.

It can also be used to describe MacWilliam's work. This is exemplified in a work such as *45 rpm* (2000) (Figure 17), a video (black-and-white, silent, 4 minutes, 34 seconds) of a zoetrope constructed by the artist.⁷⁴ *45 rpm* featured images of the artist performing a simple gesture of raising her hand to her forehead, a reference to the artist's 1999 video, *Faint*, in which MacWilliam, dressed in Victorian garb, performed the act of swooning in a faint and dropping to the ground in a garden. A video of an outmoded apparatus within which still photographs are made to move in order to give the illusion of continuous motion is a definitive example of "doing things with images." The strobing effect of *45 rpm* and its spinning, motional iterations of the artist gesturing repeatedly, sets into high relief the diametric opposition between the stasis of still photography and the animation of movies and video. Barthes begins *Camera Lucida* in search of how the

⁷³Austin's performative mode in language, "doing things," dealt with invocational or effecting statements such as "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth," in which the utterance makes something happen, gets something done, in this example achieved with the simultaneous physical act of breaking a champagne bottle against the ship's bow. The effect of a ship receiving a name, as in the above example, could not be produced without the "speech act." John Langshaw Austin and J. O. Urmson, *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard University Press, 1978).

⁷⁴The zoetrope, a 19th-century optical device, is a spinning cylindrical structure lined on its interior with contiguous photographs. The viewer looks inside the cylinder through a series of slats, and when it is made to spin, the zoetrope produces the illusory effect of motion.

photograph is different than cinema.⁷⁵ MacWilliam raises similar questions by off-setting still photography against motional film in many of her video works, using stills (and stillness) to highlight motion and the idea that the illusory effect of filmic motion is the result of having “made (still) images move.” Conversely she engages motion to frame stillness, and in both instances produces a self-reflexive awareness of the properties of her respective media. *The Last Person* intercuts between video and stills, and many of her video projects thereafter include the use of stills, often being made to move manually by the artist (*Experiment M*, *Headbox*, *Kuda Bux*, *13 Roland Gardens*) or in producing the feeling of movement by rapid sequential shots of stills or by pan-and-scanning the visual real estate of the surfaces of found images in *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N*.

Beyond their focus on performative “image acts” (corollary of Austin’s “speech acts”), at the heart of Herron and Lynch’s argument is the relationship between photography and spectrality and their claim that photography *is* spectrality. This conflation of the photograph with death, presence, ghosts and hauntedness is situated by the authors within contemporary photographic theory, and they cite Barthes, Phillippe Dubois and Sontag, among others, to support this paradigm. Herron and Lynch work with the rhetorical form of *prosopopeia*, “in which the absent or the dead implore the living into action.” This central impulse of *motion* aligns MacWilliam’s work with the rhetorical inquiry outlined by Herron and Lynch in their work with the images of the Bloody Sunday dead. MacWilliam’s work can also be read as engaging *prosopopeia* as a rhetorical form proper to her art in its concern with the world of occult and paranormal research, with its direct line of communication to the dead. In this regard MacWilliam’s

⁷⁵“My interest in Photography took a cultural turn. I decided I liked Photography *in opposition* to the Cinema, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it.” Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* □: *Reflections on Photography*, 1st American pbk. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 3.

work itself can be read as the resultant action in response to a call from the dead. In its central themes of occult and paranormal research, its incorporation of video and photography and its use of photography in such a way as to bring attention to the contrast between the static image and the motional medium of video, MacWilliam's work speaks to the interrelatedness of death and photography, asserting photography's spectral core. Such spectrality as played out in the demonstration and display of images of the dead addressed by Herron and Lynch, and evidenced in the MacWilliam's work, carry with them the valence of occult and paranormal themes that circulate throughout discourse of The Troubles and the cultural production that has been generated around the conflict as discussed in the previous chapter.

Herron and Lynch's rhetorical analysis of image use in connection with Bloody Sunday dead is a history of potent and persuasive visual communications that lead to the establishment of the Saville Inquiry. Many of the terms engaged by Herron and Lynch are applicable to the terms of MacWilliam's work. Such terms include 1) the use of archival images and text, 2) images of images (painted or reproduced in various formats), 3) gestural/performative interaction with images. The most salient overlay between the visual rhetoric discussed by Herron and Lynch and MacWilliam's art, however, is situated in the primacy of images of the dead as well as in discourse and cult practices engaging the dead. MacWilliam has incorporated images of the dead since 1998, in virtually every work she has produced. Even works such as *Faint* and *45 rpm* which feature images of the artist without making specific historical references to dead personages, there are compelling associations to death. In *Faint* the artist continuously falls to the ground in a swoon and lies there, as if dead. In *45 rpm* still images of the

artist are spun in multiple to give the illusion of movement, a mechanical process that calls attention to the juncture between movement and stasis, highlighting the still image as existing in a deathly state, in need of reanimation. MacWilliam's practice as a whole can be understood in terms of the capacity of the static dead to mobilize the animate living.

In their book, *Talking to the dead: A study in Irish Funerary Traditions*, described as "an essay on death and its tenacious hold on Irish culture," Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran home in on the conflation of performative rituals and mythologies surrounding death and broader cultural forms in Ireland.⁷⁶ The rhetorical form of *prosopopeia* seems to echo in the following passage about mourning and activism.

The instances of the cult of death to which we have alluded, and their intimate links with Irish nationalism, point to a society in which, for long, the funerary sign has remained a strong communal binder and mourning a unifying factor. The concluding words of a funeral oration delivered in 1985 by Gerry Adams over the graves of three IRA volunteers indicate these functions:

Go ndéana Dia trócaire ar a n-anamacha dílse. [May God have mercy on their loyal souls.] To mourn them is to organise. Let's go, friends from this sacred spot and mourn them. (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 28 February 1985)⁷⁷

Here, through what might be read as a textual inversion of Joe Hill's infamous, "Don't mourn, organize," the act of mourning is conflated with political action.⁷⁸ Mourning, in this construction, is politicized, is declared to be an action, to be a form of activism, a

⁷⁶While this source has been cited widely, I was unable to find a scholarly book review that would help me to gauge the broader reception of this text. It is referred to as "wonderfully contentious" by Declan Kiberd in the acknowledgements for his book, *Irish Classics*. Nina Witoszek and Patrick F. Sheeran, *Talking to the Dead: a Study of Irish Funerary Traditions* (Rodopi, 1998).

⁷⁷Ibid., 36.

⁷⁸Thanks to elin o'Hara slavick for pointing out the association. Gibbs M. Smith, *Joe Hill* (Gibbs Smith, 1969), 1.

performative configuration within which the state of being in mourning is imbued with the valence of motion, of agitation, of bonding with a collective, of making things happen. As discussed in the last chapter, and as pointed out by Kelly, MacWilliam has made conscious choices to separate her practice from nationalistic, religious, political discourse in her work. Nevertheless, MacWilliam's work can productively be read in the terms set forth by Witoszek and Sheeran and by Herron and Lynch. MacWilliam's work does not speak to overt political issues. However, read through the very context she disclaims, her performative use of photography, her embrace of occult and paranormal themes, but perhaps most significantly, her very act of creating works of art registers as not precisely as activism, but as action. She is mobilized, and the core of her work, from 1998 into the present, arises out of an impulse toward motion, "to make images move." Further, *prosopopeia* permeates MacWilliam's project. Her work documents people who have been mobilized by the dead. They have heard from the dead, they listen for the dead, and they look for visual manifestations of invisible forces of the dead. The desire for such manifestation is so strong that fraudulent productions to fulfill such desire are understood to be, as MacWilliam suggests, "OK." The fulfillment far outweighs dubious constructions and fraudulent evidentiary images.

The locus *par excellence* for the return of the dead to comfort the living is photography. The photograph has everything to do with death and mourning. In his paper, "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud describes the work of mourning as a process, a painful process, a process of "painful unpleasure," that exacts a "great price of time and cathectic energy" in which to achieve a deferred liberation of the ego.⁷⁹ He describes

⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia* (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 244.

how such process can sometimes take the form of a “hallucinatory wishful psychosis,” a term that needs to be explored in its association with the construction of images. Freud’s hallucinatory wishful psychosis is formed around a loss, a loss of a loved one, a powerful motivating force that triggers the mourner into the act of mourning, which can be understood as engaging in the “production” of hallucinatory wishes. Freud’s emphasis on “hallucinatory” pushes the idea of mourning toward the visual, indeed toward visual production. A hallucination is, after all, a “produced” image. Barthes identified one of photography’s central properties as its ability to “mechanically repeat what could never be repeated existentially,” a wish-fulfilling persistence of being denied us by death.⁸⁰

MacWilliam’s self-reflexive engagement with photography, in which we cannot dissociate images from the fact that they are constructed, underscores their mechanical reproducibility. The artist’s interest in making images move brings such mechanical underpinnings to light and dispels the inherent illusionistic nature of filmic motion. Her central themes of the occult and the paranormal associates her work with the impulse of mourning as a mode of visual production described in Freudian terms above.

MacWilliam’s process of artmaking, in its themes of occult and paranormal research, with its attendant themes of death, grief, loss and mourning, haunting and hauntedness, and even in its ambiguities that echo the contested meanings of *The Troubles*, resounds with the conflation of mourning and action communicated in the eulogy spoken by Gerry Adams. MacWilliam’s work may not be political, but its themes and facture suggest it can be read as a response to death, which includes the process of mourning.

Although Herron and Lynch employ visual rhetoric and describe a performative use of images for the purposes of political persuasion, the underlying impulse of

⁸⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 4.

mobilization is central. Political activism is also a form of mobilization, of action, a subset of terms all of which pertain to movement itself. MacWilliam's work is not political. But it shares rhetorical, performative, structural and thematic impulses that align her with the actions that brought justice to the Bloody Sunday dead. MacWilliam's rhetorical and performative modes harness *prosopopeia*, in which the dead implore the living into action. Such calls to action are not overtly political, but they demand complex responses and often physically awkward *inter*-actions with the work on the part of her viewers. By putting the occult and paranormal claims of her subjects front and center she places viewers into the awkward and uncomfortable position of not knowing where she stands on a fringe subject, putting them in a position of having to confront their own beliefs. But, more importantly, the impulse of *prosopopeia* has motivated MacWilliam, her work can be understood the response to a call to action from the dead, a response to a television documentary on issues of the occult and the paranormal that she saw in 1997, and perhaps less directly in response to the violent conflict that she denies responding to in her work, which over the decades since 1969 has resulted in hundreds of Northern Irish dead.

In light of the arguments set forth here, which suggest that MacWilliam's work can be read as a part of (as well as apart from) the context of The Troubles, it is important to bear in mind Noel Kelly's description of MacWilliam's non-position in relation to overtly political art as an "apparent 'apartness'." In so doing Kelly insists on MacWilliam's separation from the conflict as being as much a function of *appearance* as a bona fide disjuncture. It is, as Kelly suggests, a point of negotiation. Further, inasmuch as MacWilliam's work circulates around issues of appearances, apparitions, dubious

visual evidence and compelling aesthetic illusion, the question of appearance needs to be approached in a nuanced fashion when used to consider the artist's practice. Kelly also puts the word "apartness" in quotes, suggesting such apartness may be merely superficial. The Troubles may not be traceable in MacWilliam's work in a narrative sense. However, there are numerous ways in which MacWilliam's work shares the conceptual, structural and textual impulses described by Herron and Lynch as a form of persuasive rhetoric, situated centrally within the matrix of themes that permeate the discourse and cultural production of The Troubles, which include death, grief, loss, and mourning; haunting and hauntedness; and questions of belief, truth and contested meanings.

Further, MacWilliam's "apparent 'apartness'" can be understood as a form of critique, or, more to the point, an alternative to critique. In his essay, "Private Lives, Public Gestures," Jan Verwoert puts forth the idea that critique of the institutional structures that shape society can result in a closed-circuit mode of thinking: with institutional critique it is the institution that defines the terms of the discourse.⁸¹ Verwoert proposes an alternative to social critique in harnessing the "performative dynamics of the practices that bind society together." While Verwoert acknowledges such social practices are also regulated, their qualities of multiplicity and theatricality produce an inherently chaotic condition that destabilizes perceptions of societal structures, "making interventions appear possible."⁸² *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N* is an example of both establishing and destabilizing filmic conventions in a way that could be understood as "intervention," in its techniques of interrupting illusionistic motion with

⁸¹Jan Verwoert, "Private Lives, Public Gestures, 2," *Frieze*, no. 113 (March 2008), http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_article/private_lives_public_gestures_2/.

⁸²Note the resonant reappearance of the idea of the "apparent" here, an affirmation of the significance of MacWilliam's "apparent 'apartness'." Ibid.

rapid-fire static stills, refusing linear narratives, and by establishing and destabilizing claims. MacWilliam is never seen but her presence is felt in the interplay between herself as director and her filmed interview subjects, Carson and Roll, both of whom alternate between formal spoken word performance and casual, “off-camera” modes of commentary, giving feedback to the unseen director of the video on questions of tone and approach to the texts they are asked to voice, Carson’s litany of cinematic terms, and Roll’s elaborate taxonomy of the paranormal, in which he calmly enumerates terms such as, “telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, retrocognition, remote viewing, poltergeist, recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis...” At one point we hear MacWilliam’s voice feeding Roll the phrase “cloud of ectoplasm,” for him to repeat, which he does, numerous times, with long pauses in between. A brief exchange between MacWilliam and Carson plays out simply as, MacWilliam: “Ok?” Carson: “Yep.” In *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N* there is no single, dominant mode of communication. Audio tracks often bleed over and are offset against unrelated still and moving images. Such continual shifting of terms produces a self-conscious awareness of the constructedness of the piece, of photographs, of language, of systems of belief.

The aesthetic gesture that points away from conflict can be as radical as the one that describes it. To stand in the middle of a battle field and proceed to paint a pastoral landscape could be considered a political act. In the terms set forth above, MacWilliam’s particular mode of “organizing” can be readily understood as the very practice in which she engages. Further, there is no essential “separation” between art and politics, hence, Kelly’s description of MacWilliam’s “apparent ‘apartness’,” rather than simply

suggesting that she sets herself apart. Verwoert enumerates the parallel modes of communication in which both art and politics engage:

Art and politics belong to the same trade. They share the medium of gesture, which, in its expanded sense, encompasses all the physical manifestations through which people confront each other and seek to evoke desired responses, whether by speech and expressions of body language or by the display of signs and signals in images, texts, music or architecture.⁸³

While working on *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N*, in an email to art critic Slavka Sverakova, MacWilliam wrote, “I am making a séance cabinet in the studio based on that of Thomas Glendenning Hamilton. I have always thought the process of manifestations and materialisations of the séance room to be similar to the realisation of ideas and objects in the studio.”⁸⁴ This sense of displacement, of corresponding meanings, in itself echoes an occult sensibility located in many esoteric modes of thought. Consider, for example, the table of correspondences in Aleister Crowley’s book *777*.⁸⁵ For the purposes of this paper, however, MacWilliam’s own sense that a whole practice or sensibility could be understood as being potentially interchangeable with another, makes room for the possibility that her work could also be read in the social, political and cultural context of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

As outlined in the previous chapter, another trace thematic that associates MacWilliam’s work with The Troubles is the realm of contested meanings. As Dixon and O’Kane discuss in their book, *Northern Ireland Since 1969*, the ideological volatility

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Slavka Sverakova, “Susan MacWilliam: Portraying a Worldview,” in Susan MacWilliam and Karen Downey, *Remote Viewing* (London, UK: Black Dog Pub., 2008), 111.

⁸⁵Aleister Crowley and Israel Regardie, *777 And Other Qabalistic Writings of Aleister Crowley* (Weiser Books, 1986), 1.

of the conflict created a context of shifting and multiple truths, a condition in which histories were continually reconstructed in order to gain political ground. The levels of prolonged violence gave rise to competing and distorted recastings of these histories which have never been fully resolved.⁸⁶ The original hearings that took place after the Bloody Sunday events, conducted by a Lord Widgery in 1972, were so skewed in favor of the British military as to render their findings virtually moot.⁸⁷ Herron and Lynch make it clear that even under ideal circumstances the Saville Report would never be able to fully clarify or produce an agreed-upon version of truth about the events of Bloody Sunday. Hope for anything along the lines of "truth" is scaled-back to an impoverished expectation for a reduction of lies.⁸⁸ This sense of a web of complexity and contradictory "truths" has been a part of MacWilliam's work since she began working in the medium of video and photography, with her emphasis on the inherent ambiguities produced in "evidentiary" photography. The world of occult and paranormal research is a world of contested meanings, far-flung imaginaries, fraudulent "evidence," magical thinking, always further destabilized by the possibility that within the vortex of the fantastic lies a stranger-than-fiction truth.

MacWilliam's work arises out of a rejection of what Verwoert has called "the inherent violence of authoritative acts of institution."⁸⁹ When I asked MacWilliam if she could comment on Kelly's paragraph describing her "apparent 'apartness'" and the

⁸⁶Dixon and O'Kane, *Northern Ireland Since 1969*, 5.

⁸⁷Herron and Lynch, "Like 'Ghosts Who'd Walked Abroad'," 59.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Verwoert, "Private Lives, Public Gestures, 2."

complex and contradictory discourse that circulated around “Troubles art,” she offered the following:

[T]his kind of came out of a conversation that I had with Noel Kelly when we met to discuss the article he was writing about me for CIRCA. Basically a lot of people made/make work about the location / identity etc – and a lot were/are working with other material / ideas etc – just with any practice in any place. In short I don’t think that my location has much bearing on my practice as my work is so specifically related to other dialogues / histories / narratives / archives etc. So maybe these questions are kind of redundant in that respect?⁹⁰

If we consider the idea of an oppressive cultural atmosphere in which an artist is/was expected to produce “socially relevant” work, a condition described by Kelly as the cultural tenor in Belfast that spurred MacWilliam to attend college in Manchester and, upon her return, to consciously separate herself from overtly Troubles-based art, we can begin to understand MacWilliam’s aesthetic choices as arising out of, and against, a kind of institutional authority, in this case that of a dominant and perhaps dominating paradigm of cultural production. This paper does not question the legitimacy of MacWilliam's position not to address political issues in her work, nor does it insist that The Troubles serve as a necessary lens through which to view the work. Nevertheless, the overlay and confluence of themes that permeate MacWilliam's work, and which find form throughout the cultural production and discourse of The Troubles, and in the methodologies engaged by the artist of visual rhetoric and performative, self-reflexive use of images, align it with activism in Northern Ireland.

Since producing *The Last Person*, her inaugural work of video and photography, which was also her first work in the world of occult and paranormal research, MacWilliam has operated within a paradigm of visual rhetoric and performative image

⁹⁰ Email from Susan MacWilliam to the author dated March 16, 2012.

use that, despite her “apparent ‘apartness’” from making overtly political work, allows her work to be read in terms of a *political ethos* in its confluence of the themes of death, grief, loss, and mourning; haunting and hauntedness; and questions of belief, truth and contested meanings that permeates the discourse and cultural production surrounding The Troubles. In the end, by refusing overt political narrative content, MacWilliam’s work has the potential to remain relevant beyond its own historic moment.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Screen-shots from *Some Ghosts* (2009), video, color, stereo. *Some Ghosts* is a video portrait of the Atlanta-based Danish American poltergeist investigator Dr. William G Roll (1926-2012). Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



Figure 2. Screen-shots from *The Last Person* (1998), black and white, silent, 10 minutes, 30 seconds. Based on the case of Helen Duncan (1898-1956). Duncan, a medium from Portsmouth, Scotland, was the last person to be tried under the British Witchcraft Act of 1735. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



MacWilliam/Duncan mouth. Overt artifice.



The artist performing ectoplasmic emission.

(Continues next page.)

Figure 1. (Continued.)



Compelling illusionistic still photograph.



Table tilting. Ectoplasmic rod.

Figure 3. Installation views. *Headbox* (2004). Source: susanmacwilliam.com.



Wall mounted Headbox housing stereoscope and speakers. Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin 2004



Experimental table and chairs on viewing platform. Wall mounted Headbox. Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin 2004



3 TV cubes with 3 DVDs . Wall mounted Headbox. Headbox, 2004, Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin 2004

Figure 4. Installation views. *Experiment M* (1999) Source: susanmacwilliam.com.



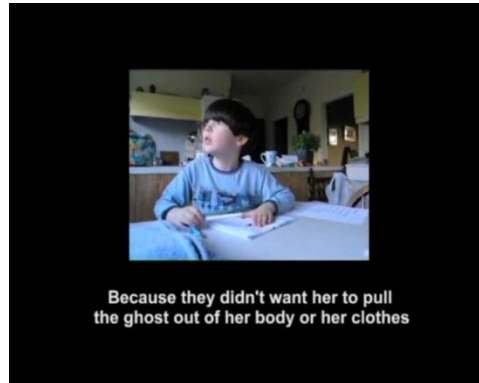
Figure 5. Installation views. *Kuda Bux* (2003) Source: susanmacwilliam.com.



Figure 6. Screen-shots from *Library* (2008), video, color, stereo. Video portrait of library space at the Parapsychology Foundation, New York. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



Figure 7. Screen-shot from *Explaining Magic to Mercer* (2005), installation with video and framed images. The artist discusses with her 5 year old nephew Mercer the historical figures that have been the subject of her work. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



The interview proceeds with the artist off-screen and answering questions with no sound, her words substituted by white subtitles on black.

Installation views. *Explaining Magic to Mercer* (2005). Source: susanmacwilliam.com.

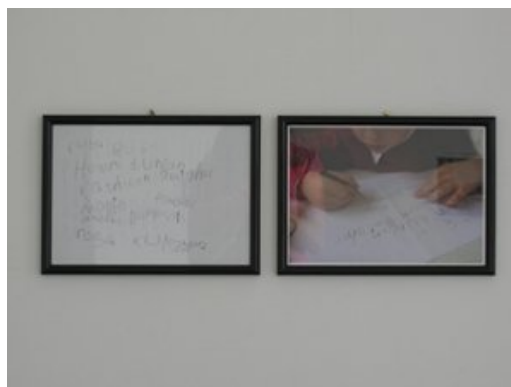
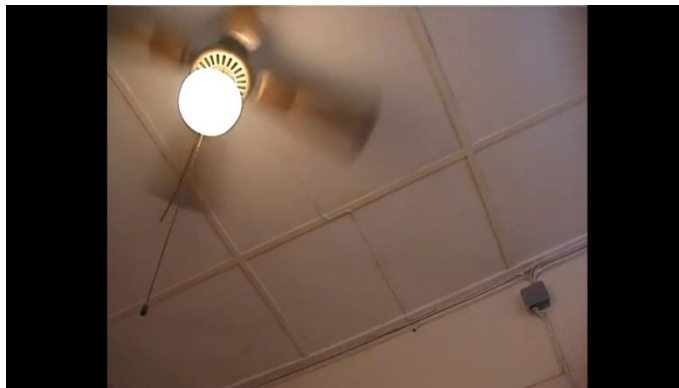


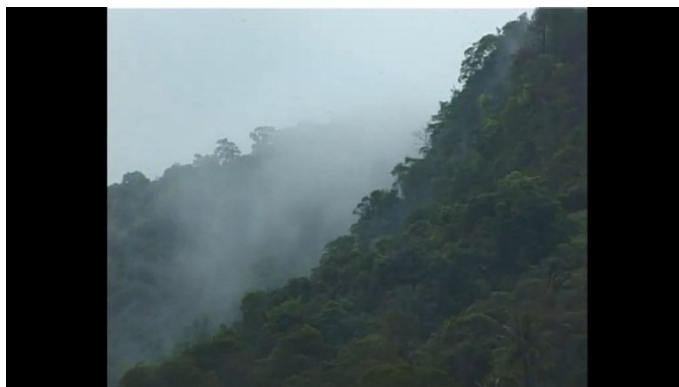
Figure 8. Screen-shots from *On The Eye* (2002), installation of three projected video works. Projected images of a lightning storm, ceiling fans and mountain mist. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



Lightning storm.



Ceiling fan.



Mountain.

Figure 9. Screen-shots from *Psychic Edit* (2008), video, color, stereo. *Psychic Edit* presents a strobing edit of archival home movie footage of Eileen Garrett from the Garrett-Coly personal archives. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



Figure 10. Screen-shots from *After Image* (2002), black and white and color, Stereo, 4 minutes, 30 seconds. Based on the myth that the eye records the last image seen before death. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



Image from *Los Muertos Hablan* (1935), Gabriel Soria, director, Mexico.



Image of the eye.



Eye as screen. Image from *Los Muertos Hablan* (1935), Gabriel Soria, director, Mexico.

Figure 11. Screen-shots from *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N* (2009), commissioned for MacWilliam's solo exhibition at the 2009 Venice Biennale, Blu-ray, color, stereo. In 1931 a “teleplasm” spelling out the name “Flammarion” appeared on the wall of a cabinet at a séance in Winnipeg. Poltergeist investigator Dr. William G. Roll, poet and writer Ciaran Carson and medium's granddaughter Arla Marshall come together in *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N* and respond to the image of the teleplasm. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



Vintage camera against brightly colored monochrome field.



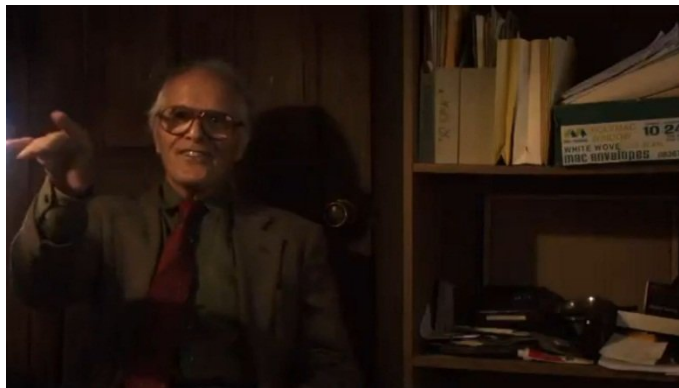
Séance photograph from the Hamilton archive.

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Figure 11. (Continued.)



Poet Ciaran Carson reading aloud in séance cabinet in MacWilliam's studio.



Dr. William G. Roll discussing how the video might work with an off-screen MacWilliam.

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Figure 11. (Continued.)

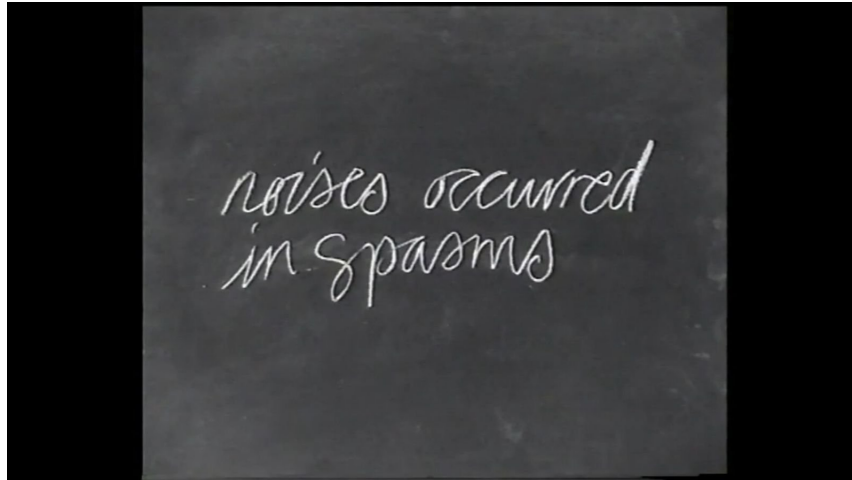


Teleplasmic letters from Hamilton archive. Sepia toned.



Teleplasmic letters from Hamilton archive. Black and white.

Figure 12. Screen-shots from *Experiment M* (1999), installation with two videos (text and visuals) black and white, silent, 5 minutes, 43 seconds. Based on the case of the Belfast, Northern Ireland, born levitation medium Kathleen Goligher and researcher Dr. William Jackson Crawford. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.

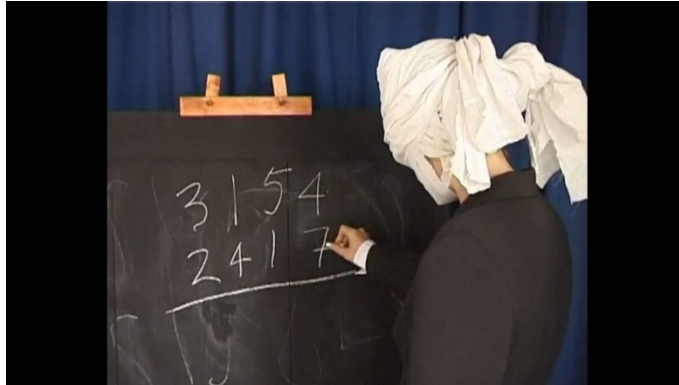


Hand-written text on chalkboard references experiments and intimacy between researcher and subject.



MacWilliam as Kathleen Goligher holding book with photographic plate of research space in room constructed to mimic image.

Figure 13. Screen-shots from *Kuda Bux* (2003), installation with video work, black and white and color, stereo, 10 minutes, 40 seconds. The New York mystic Kuda Bux was made famous during the 1930s and 40s by his dramatic demonstrations of eyeless sight. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



MacWilliam as Bux performing eyeless sight.

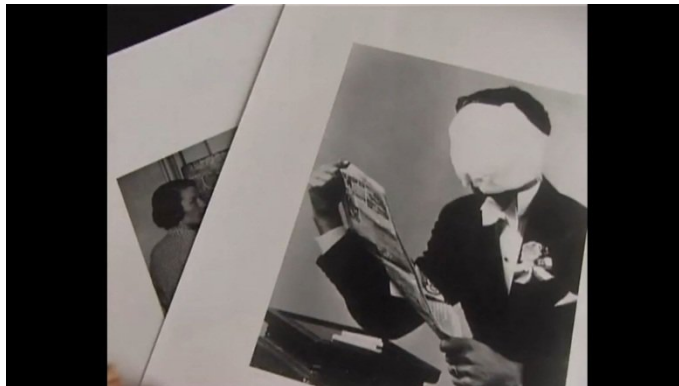


Image of images. Archival photograph of Bux.



Video of filmed footage of Bux performing eyeless sight.

Figure 14. Screen-shot from *Dermo Optics* (2006), installation with video projection. *Dermo Optics* presents the experimental research of Madame Yvonne Duplessis in the science of “seeing” color through touch. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



The artist interacting with dermo-optical research apparatus.

Installation view. *Dermo-Optics* (2006). Source: susanmacwilliam.com.



Figure 15. Screen-shots from *Headbox* (2004), installation of objects and three video works. Based on the case of Rosa Kuleshova, a young woman who claimed to read with her fingertips. She was the subject of intense scientific observation in Russia in the 1960s. The term “Headbox” refers to a wall-mounted box designed to suppress the sight of the subject. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



The artist with apparatus for suppression of sight. She performs with paper, scissors, printed pages and a glue stick, cutting out images and constructing three dimensional displays by folding, gluing and pasting the pieces she has cut.



The artist with apparatus for suppression of sight. She performs with paper, scissors, printed pages and a glue stick, cutting out images and constructing three dimensional displays by folding, gluing and pasting the pieces she has cut.

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Figure 15. (Continued.)



MacWilliam sightlessly demonstrating cut-outs.



All three videos in the *Headbox* installation include video of a flock of birds against the sky, performing simultaneous shifts of direction with effortless precision.

Figure 16. Screen-shots from *13 Roland Gardens* (2007) video, color, stereo, 22 minutes, 30 seconds. Eileen Coly, daughter of the Irish medium Eileen J Garrett, describes 13 Roland Gardens where she and her mother lived in the early 1930s. It was also the site of Harry Price's Laboratory of Psychical Research. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



Eileen Coly

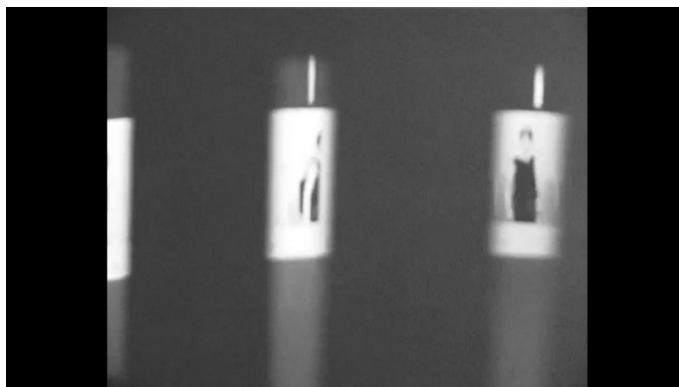
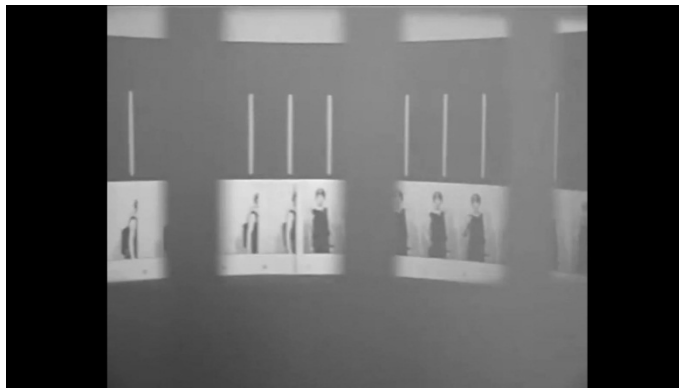
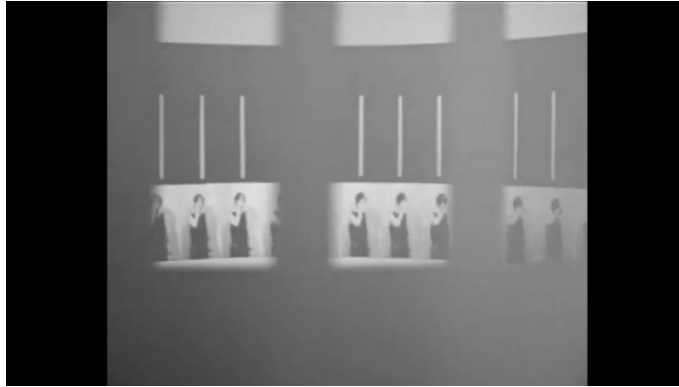


Eileen Coly and Lisette Coly



Eileen Garrett, family album.

Figure 17. Screen-shots from *45 rpm* (2000), black and white, silent, 4 minutes, 34 seconds. The work presents images of a spinning zoetrope, a 19th-century optical device designed to produce the illusion of motion. Includes images of the artist repeatedly raising her hand to her forehead. Source: Online archive of Susan MacWilliam.



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